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[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.]

# WORKS BY THE AUTHOR OF JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

(CONTINUED.)

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**HANNAH.**

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# HANNAH.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

‘JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,’

ETC. ETC.

‘None ever feared that the truth should be heard,  
But those whom the truth wad indite.’—BURNS.



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# H A N N A H.

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## CHAPTER I.

‘A STRANGE, sad kind of letter,’ said Miss Thelluson to herself, as she refolded and replaced it in its envelope: she had a habit of always putting things back into their right places. ‘I suppose I ought to answer it at once. And yet——’

She stopped; leant her elbow on the table, her head upon her hand, and pressed down her eyelids. They were wet eyelids—though she was not exactly weeping—and tired eyes; for it was late at night, and she had had a hard day’s work, of teaching first, and private study, in order to teach, afterwards; since, not being a brilliantly clever woman, it cost her some pains to keep up to the level of accomplishments required of a first-class governess in a ‘high’ family.

‘High’ though it was, an earl’s indeed—and though the little Ladies Mary, Georgina, and Blanche, now safely asleep in their beds, were good, pleasant children, and very fond of their governess—still, as she sat in that homely-furnished, dimly-lighted sitting-room, Hannah Thelluson looked a lonely kind of woman; not one of those likely to make many friends, or keep up a large correspondence. This letter, which seemed to affect her a good deal, was the only one which she had received for days past, and the servants had forgotten to bring it up until they brought her supper: it did not matter, being only for the governess. Miss Thelluson was scarcely sorry: it was best read when

she was alone, for it was from her brother-in-law, the husband of her lately dead sister.

‘Poor Rosa!’ she sighed, as her eyes fell on the big, upright, rather peculiar handwriting which she had scarcely seen since the time when she used to bring in Rosa’s daily love-letters—‘and poor Mr. Rivers, too!’

She had never learned to call him anything but Mr. Rivers; for the marriage, which had all come about when Rosa was on a visit, had been a sudden, frantic love-match between a rich young man and a lovely, penniless girl; and during their brief bright year of wedded happiness, the elder sister had seen almost nothing of them beyond a formal three-days’ visit. But even that had been enough to make Hannah not regret that her duties had stood in the way of her pleasures, and caused her to feel by instinct that a grave governess-sister was not likely to advance young Mrs. Rivers’s dignity in the eyes of Lady Rivers and the people at the Moat-House, who had looked very coldly on the marriage. And when fate suddenly broke the tie, leaving Mr. Rivers a sorrowing widower with a little month-old daughter instead of the longed-for son and heir, Hannah bitterly felt that, whosoever might grieve after poor Rosa, it would not be her husband’s family.

They merely communicated to her the fact of the death, which, like the birth, had taken place abroad; and except a brief answer from the grandmother to a letter she wrote, inquiring after the baby, she had heard no more. She could not leave her duties; she had to sit still and suffer—silently, as working women must, and patiently, as women learn to suffer who have been, to use that most pathetic of phrases, ‘acquainted with grief.’ She had put forward no claim either for sympathy or consideration to her brother-in-law or his relatives, and believed that henceforth the slight intercourse she ever had with them was probably ended.

Therefore she was a good deal surprised to receive this letter, which entreated of her the very last thing she would have expected—that she would assume a sister's place towards Mr. Rivers, and come and take charge of his household, and especially of her little motherless niece.

‘How strange!’ she kept thinking. ‘How can he want me when he has sisters of his own?’ But then she remembered that the Misses Rivers were young and lively women, very much out in society, and probably not inclined to burden themselves with the care of a widower's dreary house and a widower's forlorn infant, even for the sake of their own flesh-and-blood brother. So he came for help to his wife's sister—who, though almost a stranger to himself, could not but feel, he said, the strong tie of blood which bound her to his child. He pleaded, for this child's sake, that she would come.

Hannah could not help feeling pleased and touched. It was a sort of compliment which, coming to her, a lonely woman, and from a person of whom she knew so little, was rather pleasant than not. She tried to recall all she had ever noticed of her brother-in-law—not very much; except that, though he was young, handsome, and rather excitable, there seemed a simplicity and affectionateness about him which she had rather liked. Still, in their slight intercourse, the only thing the sister had ever cared to find out was that he loved Rosa and Rosa loved him. Satisfied of these two facts, she had left the young people to their happiness, and gone back to her own quiet life; which would have been a dreary life, had she herself been a less self-dependent and unexacting woman.

And now the happiness, which she might have envied had she seen more of it, was over and done. Bright, beautiful Rosa had lain six months in her grave; and here was Rosa's husband asking the solitary sister to fulfil towards him and his child all the

duties of a near and dear relative. For he addressed her as 'My dear sister;' and in his letter, which was impulsive, fragmentary, and evidently in earnest, he seemed to fling himself upon her pity and help, as if he had no one else to appeal to.

'I have been reading over again the letters you used to send weekly to my poor Rosa,' he wrote; 'it is these which have induced me to make this request: for they convince me that you must be a good woman—a woman fitted to give help and consolation to such a forlorn creature as I am. How forlorn, you little know! A man who has had a wife and lost her, is the wretchedest creature on earth—ininitely more wretched than one who has never known that blessing. Every day, every hour, I miss my darling. Continually I hear, in a sort of ghostly way, her step about the house, her voice outside in the garden; till sometimes, in the excessive loneliness, I am actually frightened—not of her, but of myself—lest I should be going mad. Men do go mad with grief sometimes, especially husbands who have lost their wives. I have read several such cases in the newspapers lately: my eye seems to light upon them, and my mind to retain them, with a horrible pertinacity. But why trouble you with these personalities? No more.'

And then he began to describe his baby; saying she was a dear little thing, but that he did not understand her. She seemed to be always crying, and nobody could manage her, though he saw a different woman almost every time he came into the nursery.

When she first read this passage Hannah had started up, her always pale face hot and warm. The weak point in her nature—rather a pathetic weakness in one whom some people called, and she herself firmly believed to be, a born old maid—was her love of children. Her heart had yearned oftentimes over Rosa's motherless babe, but she felt that she could not

interfere with the grandmother and father. Now the picture of it—transferred from nurse to nurse, neglected or ignored—smote her with a sort of self-reproach, as if her pride or her shyness, or both, had led her weakly to desert her own flesh and blood—her sister's child.

‘I ought to have gone and seen it—seen what they were doing with it. I have as much right to it as any one of them all. Poor little baby! Rosa's very own baby!’

The tears, which came so rarely and painfully to her eyes, came now; and they did her good. It seemed to open and warm her heart even to think of that little baby.

Gradually her thoughts took shape and purpose. Though she seldom meditated much upon herself, still Miss Thelluson had not lived thirty years in this troublesome world without knowing her own character pretty well. She was quite aware of one great want in her nature—the need to be a mother to somebody or something. It came out even towards the large white cat that lived in the school-room, and loved the governess better than any creature in the house. It had helped her to manage many a difficult pupil, and stood her in good stead with her little Ladies Dacre, who, before she came, had been rather disagreeable and unmanageable children. Now they were very good, and loved her with all their aristocratic little hearts—as warm as other hearts, though perhaps more suppressed. She loved them also; but it was rather a sad kind of affection, as she knew it could be only temporary. They would drift away from her, and marry earls and dukes; and she would be no more to them than ‘our old governess.’ It was nearly the same with other little folks of her own rank—the children of her friends or schoolfellows—who generally called her Aunt Hannah, and were very fond of her while she was with them; but, of course, soon forgot her

when she was away. All natural—quite natural; yet it sometimes seemed rather sad.

Now here was a child to whom she had an actual right of blood. Whether or not the Rivers family had liked Rosa, or herself, they could not abolish the fact that she was the child's aunt; and, if the father desired it, its natural guardian. The first impulse of strangeness and shrinking passed away, and as she read over again Mr. Rivers's letter, and began clearly to comprehend what he wished, there grew up a longing, indescribable, after that duty which was set before her in such a sudden and unexpected way; yet which, the more she thought about it, seemed the more distinct and plain.

She dried her eyes, and, late as it was, prepared to answer the letter, knowing she would not have leisure to do it next morning before post-time. Besides, she wished to 'sleep upon it,' as people say, and then read it over again in the calm light of day: Hannah Thelluson being one of those people who dislike doing things in a hurry, but who, having once put their hands to the plough, never look back.

She was fully aware that if she acceded to her brother-in-law's request she must not look back; however difficult the position might be, it would be still more difficult to quit it and return to her old calling as a governess. And that provision for her old age, which she was year by year slowly accumulating,—with the pathetic prudence of a woman who knows well that only her own labour stands between her and the workhouse,—that too must be given up. For Mr. Rivers would, of course, offer her no salary; and, if he did, how could she possibly accept it? Was she not coming to his house as a sister, with all the honours and some few of the bondages of that relationship? Her common sense told her that, pleasant as in some measure her duties might be, they entailed considerable sacrifices as well. But women like her, though

they dislike a leap in the dark, will often take a most difficult and dangerous one with their eyes open, fully counting the cost.

‘Yes. I will venture it,’ she said, after a long pause of thought. ‘The risk cannot be much,—and it is only my own risk, after all.’

So she sat down to write her letter.

While she does so, let us look at her,—the solitary governess whom few ever looked at now.

Miss Thelluson could not have been handsome, even in her first youth, which was past now. Her face was long and thin; her eyes deep-set, though they were sweet eyes in themselves, grave and tender, and of a soft grey. Her hair was of no particular colour,—in fact, she had no special attraction of any kind, except a well-proportioned figure, which in motion had a willowy grace that some tall women—not all—possess. And her smile was very winning, though slightly sad, as if fate had meant her to be a bright-natured woman, but had changed its mind, and left her so long without happiness that she had at last learnt to do without it. In this, as in most other things—external as well as internal—she was utterly unlike her sister Rosa. A certain family tone in their voices was the only resemblance that was likely in any way to give the widower pain.

It was strange to write to him,—‘My dear brother,’—she who never had a brother—but she thought she ought to do it, and so she did it; trying hard to feel as an affectionate sister should towards a sorely afflicted brother, unto whom she was bound to show every possible tenderness. Yet it was difficult, for she was a reserved woman, who took a long time to know anybody.

‘And I really know almost nothing of him,’ she thought. ‘No blood-relationship,—no tie of old association; and yet one is expected to treat a strange man as one’s brother, just because one’s sister has gone

through the marriage ceremony with him. If I had seen more of Mr. Rivers,—if I had lived actually in the house with him—— But, no; that would not have done it; nothing would have produced what did not really exist. I can only hope the right sisterly feeling will come in time, and I must get on as well as I can till it does come.'

So she pondered, and wrote a letter; short, indeed, but as affectionate as she could conscientiously make it; suggesting plainly that one of his own sisters would be a much better house-keeper for him than herself; but that, if he really wished for her, she would come. And she signed herself, after a considerable struggle,—for the word, which she had thought she should never say or write more, cost her a gush of tears,—'Your faithful sister, Hannah Thelluson.'

It was fully one in the morning before the letter was done, and she had to be up at six, as usual. But she slept between whiles soundly, not perplexing herself about the future. Hers was an essentially peaceful nature; when she had done a thing, and done it for the best, she usually let it alone, and did not 'worry' about it any more. That weak, restless disposition, which, the moment a thing is done begins to wish it undone, was happily not hers. It had been Rosa's, even in the midst of her bright, pleasant, loved, and loving life; which, perhaps, accounted for the elder sister's habits being markedly the contrary.

Yet, when her mind was made up, and she put her letter into the post-bag, it was not without a certain doubt, almost a fear, whether she had done rightly—no, rightly she had little doubt of,—but wisely, as regarded herself. Then came her usual consolatory thought—'It can only harm myself.' Still she felt it was a serious change, and many times during the day her thoughts wandered painfully from her duties in the school-room to her brother-in-law and his child.

Nobody noticed her pre-occupation, for it was one



of the essential and familiar facts of the governess's life that she might be sick or sorry, troubled or glad, without anybody's observing it. Not that she ever met with the least unkindness,—indeed, her position in this family was a very happy one; she had everything her own way, and was treated by the countess with that stately consideration which so perfectly well-bred a woman could not fail to show to the meanest member of her household. But, necessarily, Miss Thelluson's life was one of complete isolation; so that, but for her pupils, their naughtinesses and goodnesses, she would have ceased to recognise herself as one of the great human brotherhood, and felt like a solitary nomad, of no use and no pleasure to anybody. A sensation which, morbid and foolish as it may be, is not rare to women who are neither old nor young—who, on the verge of middle age, find themselves without kith or kin, husband or child, and are forced continually to remember that the kindest of friends love them only with a tender benevolence, as adjuncts, but not essentials, of happiness. They are useful to many—necessary to none; and the sooner they recognise this, the better.

As Miss Thelluson kissed the little Ladies Dacre in their beds—where, somewhat in defiance of the grand nurse, she insisted upon going to them every night—the thought of that helpless baby, her own baby—for was not Rosa's child her very flesh and blood?—came across her in a flash of sunshiny delight that warmed her heart through and through. She began to plan and to dream, until at the end of that solitary evening walk through the park, which she seldom missed,—it was sweet and soothing after the cares of the day,—she began to fancy she had not half appreciated Mr. Rivers's proposal, nor responded to it half warmly enough; and to fear, with an almost ridiculous apprehension, that he might change his mind, or that something might happen to prevent the scheme

from being carried out. And she waited with a nervous anxiety, for which she laughed at herself, the return post by which she had requested him to write his final decision.

It came in six lines:—

‘I shall expect you, as soon as you can make it practicable. You will be like her lost mother to my poor little girl; and as for me, my wife’s sister shall be to me exactly as my own.’

Hannah wondered a little how much his own sisters were to him; whether it was the close, affectionate bond—so free yet so strong—which had always been her unknown ideal of fraternal love, or the careless tie, less of sympathy than of habit and familiarity, such as she often saw it in the world—for she had seen a good deal of the world, more or less, since she had been a governess. Also, just a little, she wondered whether, with the best intentions, it was possible to create an artificial bond where the real one did not exist, and how soon she should learn to feel at ease with Mr. Rivers, as much as if he had been her born brother.

But these speculations were idle; time would decide all things. Her only present thought need be that the die was cast; there was no drawing back now. She had, as speedily as possible, to arrange her own affairs; and first to give ‘warning’—as servants say—to Lady Dunsmore.

This was not exactly a pleasant task, for the countess and her governess had always got on together remarkably well; the one lady recognising calmly, and without either false pride or false shame, that, though a lady, she was also a governess—a paid servant, discharging her duties like the rest; the other lady receiving and appreciating those services as a lady should. Therefore, nothing was lost, and much gained on both sides. Miss Thelluson had been two years in the family, and it seemed tacitly understood that she was to remain until the young ladies’ education was

finished. Thus suddenly to desert her post looked almost like ingratitude—a vice abhorrent in all shapes to Hannah Thelluson.

It was with a hesitating step, and a heart beating much faster than its wont—this poor heart, strangely stilled down now from its youthful impulsiveness—that she knocked at the door of the morning-room where her pupils' mother, young and beautiful, happy and beloved, spent the forenoon in the elegant employments that she called duties, and which befitted her lot in life—a lot as different from that of her governess as it is possible to conceive. The two women were wide apart as the poles—in character, circumstances, destiny: yet both being good women, they had a respect, and even liking, for one another. Hannah admired the countess excessively, and Lady Dunsmore always had for her governess a smile as pleasant as that she bestowed on the best 'society.'

'Good morning, Miss Thelluson! Pray sit down. I hope nothing is amiss in the school-room? Mary seems working more diligently of late. Georgy and Blanche are not more troublesome to you than usual?'

'Indeed, I have no fault to find with either Lady Blanche or Lady Georgina, and Lady Mary is as good a girl as she can be,' returned Hannah warmly, half amused at herself for noticing what a week ago she would have accepted as too natural a fact to be observed at all,—that it never occurred to her pupils' mamma to suppose she could have any interest beyond Lady Mary, Lady Georgina, and Lady Blanche. That their governess should have a separate existence of her own, or any personal affairs to communicate, seemed quite impossible. 'Have you ten minutes to throw away, Lady Dunsmore?' continued she. 'May I have a word with you about myself and my own concerns?'

'Certainly; nothing could give me greater pleasure;' and then, with that sweet, courteous grace she had—it might be only outside good-breeding, and yet,

as it never failed her, and all outside things do fail sometimes, I think it must rather have been from her kindly heart—the countess settled herself to listen. But first she cast a slight sidelong glance of observation and inquiry. Was it possible that Miss Thelluson was going to be married?

But no love-story was indicated by the grave, quiet, dignified manner of the governess.

‘You are aware, I think,’ she said, ‘that my only sister died six months ago.’

‘Ah, I was so sorry to hear it! Was she married?’

‘Yes.’

‘Of course! I remember now. She died at her confinement, and the dear little baby also?’

‘No,’ returned Hannah shortly, and then was vexed at herself for being so foolishly sensitive. What possible impression could Rosa’s sad story have made, beyond the passing moment, on this beautiful and brilliant woman, whose interests were so wide, who had such myriads of acquaintances and friends? To expect from her more than mere kindness, the polite kindness which her manner showed, as, evidently annoyed at her own mistake, she cudgelled her memory to recall the circumstances, was exacting from Lady Dunsmore too much, more than human nature was capable of. Hannah recognised this, and saved herself and the countess by plunging at once *in medias res*. ‘No; the baby happily did not die. It is alive still, and my brother-in-law wishes me to come and take charge of it, and of his household.’

‘Permanently?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Then you come to tell me that you wish to relinquish your position here. Oh, Miss Thelluson, I am so sorry! At the commencement of the season, too. How shall I ever find time to get a new governess?’

The countess’s regret was unmistakable, though it took the personal tone which perhaps was not unnatural

in one for whom the wheels of life had always turned so smoothly, that when there was the least jar she looked quite surprised.

‘I am very sorry, too, on many accounts,’ said Miss Thelluson. ‘I love my pupils dearly. I should like to have remained until they grew up, to have dressed Lady Mary for her first drawing-room, as she always said I must, and watched how people admired Lady Blanche’s beauty and Lady Georgina’s magnificent voice. They are three dear girls,’ continued the governess, not unmoved, for she loved and was proud of her pupils. ‘My heart is sore to leave them. But this baby, my poor little niece, is my own flesh and blood.’

‘Of course! Pray do not imagine I blame you, or think you have used me ill,’ said the countess, gently. ‘You are only doing what is natural under the circumstances, and I shall easily replace you—I mean I shall easily find another governess; it will be more difficult—nearly impossible—to get a second Miss Thelluson.’

Miss Thelluson acknowledged, but did not attempt to deny, the delicate compliment. She knew she had done her duty, and that under many difficulties—far more than the countess suspected. For hapless countesses, who are the centre of brilliant societies, have only too few hours to spend in their nurseries and school-rooms; and these three little ladies owed much, more than their mother guessed, to their governess. It had sometimes been a comfort to Miss Thelluson in her dull life to hope that the seed she sowed might spring up again years hence in the hearts of these young aristocrats, who would have so much in their power for good or for evil. She had tried her best to make them really ‘noble’ women, and it was pleasant to have her labour appreciated.

‘And how soon do you wish to go?’ asked Lady Dunsmore, rather lugubriously, for she had had endless

changes of governesses before Miss Thelluson's time, and she foresaw the same thing over again—or worse.

‘Do not say I “wish” to go. But my brother-in-law requires me much, he says, and would like to have me as soon as you could spare me. Not a day sooner, though, than you find convenient. I could not bear that. You have been so kind; I have been so happy here.’

‘As I trust you will be everywhere,’ replied Lady Dunsmore, cordially. ‘Your brother's home—I forget exactly where it is.’

‘Easterham. He is the Reverend Bernard Rivers, the vicar there.’

‘Son to Sir Austin Rivers, of Easterham Moat-House, who married one of the Protheroes?’

‘I really don't know Lady Rivers's antecedents—I never can remember pedigrees,’ replied Hannah, smiling. ‘But his father is certainly Sir Austin, and they live at the Moat-House.’

‘Then I know all about them. Why did you not tell me before? I must have met your brother-in-law. He is the eldest—no, I am forgetting again—the second son, but takes the place of the eldest, who is of weak intellect; is he not?’

‘I believe so, unfortunately. He has epileptic fits.’

‘And is not likely to marry. All the better for the clergyman. I am sure I have seen him—a tall, bearded, handsome young man.’

‘Rosa used to think him handsome. As to his youth, I fancy he was about five years her senior. That would make him just my age; but men are quite young still at thirty.’

‘Women, too, I hope,’ said the countess, smiling with a pleasant consciousness that if Lodge had not betrayed it, no one would ever have imagined that she was herself fully that age. Then, as if struck with a sudden thought, she eyed Miss Thelluson keenly—one of those acute, penetrating looks of hers, a mixture of

the shrewd woman of the world with the single-minded, warm-hearted woman that she undoubtedly was, also.

‘I am going to take a great liberty with you, Miss Thelluson,’ she continued after a pause; ‘but I am a candid person—may I say a few candid words?’

‘Certainly. And I should thank you for saying them.’

‘Well, then, you are still a young woman.’

‘Oh, no; not young.’

The countess put out her pretty hand with imperative gesture, and repeated,—

‘Yes; a young unmarried woman, and I am a matron and a mother. May I ask, have you well considered in every point of view the step you are about to take?’

‘I think I have. That there are many difficulties, I know; and I am prepared for them.’

‘What sort of difficulties?’

Hannah hesitated; but the frank, kind eyes seemed to compel an answer. She was so unused to sympathy that when it did come she could not resist it,—

‘First—I know I may speak confidentially, Lady Dunsmore—first, there is the Moat-House. The Rivers family did not quite like my poor Rosa; at least, they wished their son to have married higher. They may not like me either, and they may naturally feel offended at his choosing his wife’s sister to live with him, instead of one of his own.’

‘He had better have chosen one of his own.’

‘I think so, too, and I told him this; but he makes no answer, and, therefore, I conclude he has good reasons for not wishing it, and for wishing me instead. Then I shall hold a most responsible position in his household, have much parish work to do, as much as if I were the clergyman’s wife.’

‘He should take a wife as soon as he can.’

Hannah winced a moment. ‘It is only six months

since her death; and yet—and yet——Yes! I feel with you that the sooner he takes a wife the better; his need of help, he tells me, is very great; but in the meantime I must help him all I can.'

'I am sure you will; you are made to help people,' said the countess, cordially. 'But none of these are the difficulties I was foreseeing.'

'About my poor little niece perhaps? You think an old maid cannot bring up a baby, or manage a house, with a man at the head of it—men being so peculiar? But Rosa always said her husband was the sweetest temper in the world.'

'He looked so. Not gifted with over-much strength, either mentally or bodily; but of a wonderfully amiable and affectionate nature. At least, so he struck me in the few times I saw him. I only wish I had seen more of him, that I now might judge better.'

'On my account?' said Hannah, half amused, half pleased at the unexpected kindness.

The countess took her hand. 'Will you forgive me? Will you believe that I speak purely out of my interest in you, and my conviction that, though you may be a much better woman than I, I am a wiser woman than you—at least, in worldly wisdom. Are you aware, my dear Miss Thelluson, that this is the only country in the world in which a lady of your age and position could take the step you are contemplating?'

'Why not?—what possible reason——'

'I am sorry I have put the idea into your head, since it evidently has never come there. No! I am not sorry. Whatever you do ought to be done with your eyes open. Has it never occurred to you that your brother-in-law is really no brother, no blood-relation at all to you; and that in every country, except England, a man may marry his wife's sister?'

Hannah drew back; a faint colour rose in her cheek; but it soon died out. The idea of her marry-



ing anybody seemed so supremely, ridiculously impossible — of her marrying Rosa's husband painfully so.

'It certainly did not occur to me,' she answered gently, 'and if it had, it would have made no difference in my decision. Such marriages being unlawful here, of course he is simply my brother, and nothing more.'

'He is not your brother,' persisted Lady Dunsmore. 'No force of law can make him so, or make you feel as if he were. And, I assure you, I who have gone about the world much more than you have, that I have seen many sad instances in which ——'

But the expression of distress, and even repulsion, on the governess's face, made the other lady pause.

'Well, well,' she said; 'you must have thought the matter well over, and it is, after all, purely your own affair.'

'It is my own affair,' replied Hannah, still gently, but in a way that would have closed the subject, had not the countess, with her infinite tact and good breeding, dismissed it at once herself, and begun consulting with Miss Thelluson on the best way of replacing her, and the quickest, that she might the sooner be free 'to go to that poor little baby.'

'And remember,' she added, 'that on this point you need have no qualms. My old nurse used to say that any sensible woman, with a heart in her bosom, could manage a baby.'

Hannah smiled, and her happy feeling returned, so that she was able to listen with interest, and even amusement, to a vivid description which the clever countess gave of baby's grandmother and aunts, whom she had met in London last season.

'All Easterham is *terra incognita* to me, Lady Dunsmore; but I shall try not to be afraid of anything or anybody, and to do my best, whatever happens—a very commonplace sentiment; but, you see, I was always a commonplace person,' added Hannah, smiling.

'In which case you would never have found it out,'

replied the countess, who had hitherto had few opportunities of any long talk with her governess on other topics than the children. Now, having both an aptitude and a love for the study of character, she found herself interested unawares in that grave, still, refined-looking woman, who, though perhaps, as she said, a little commonplace when in repose, was, when she talked, capable of so much and such varied expression, both of feature and of gesture—for there is a language of motion quite as plain as the language of form, and of the two, perhaps, it is the more attractive.

She said to herself, this brilliant little lady, who had seen so much of life—of aristocratic life especially, and of the terrible human passions that seethe and boil under the smooth surface of elegant idleness—she said to herself, ‘That face has a story in it.’

Yes, Miss Thelluson had had her story, early told and quickly ended; but it had coloured her whole life, for all that.

She had no brothers; but she had an orphan cousin, of whom she was very fond. As childish playfellows, the two always said they would marry one another, which everybody laughed at as an excellent joke, until it grew into earnest. Then Hannah’s father, an eminent physician, interfered. There was consumption in the family, and the young man had already shown ominous symptoms of it. His marrying anybody was unwise; his marrying a first cousin absolute insanity. Dr. Thelluson, much as he blamed himself for allowing the young people every chance of falling in love, when it was most imprudent for them to marry, was yet too good a man frantically to shut the stable-door after the steed was stolen, and to overstrain parental authority to cruelty. He did not forbid the marriage, but he remonstrated against it, both as a father and a physician, in the strongest manner, and worked so much upon Hannah’s feelings, that she consented to be separated entirely from her cousin for three years, until she came

of age. Her reason told her that was no unfair test of so youthful an attachment. Her father's secret hope was that the test might fail, the affection wear away, and the union which, though sanctioned by law and custom, he believed nature totally disapproved of, might never come about.

It never did. Long before the three years were ended, young Thelluson died at Madeira of the family disease. Hannah restored her betrothal ring to her finger, saying calmly, 'I am married now,' and seemed to bear her sorrow quietly enough at first. But the quietness grew into a stupor of despair, ending in that state of mind almost akin to madness, in which one dwells hopelessly and agonizingly upon what might have been; for some people were cruel enough to hint that a wife's care might have lengthened her lover's life, and that his grief for Hannah's loss accelerated his fatal disease. Many a time when her father looked at her he almost wished he had let the hapless cousins marry—running all risks for themselves or their possible children. But all his life the physician had held the doctrine that hereditary taint, physical or moral, constitutes a stronger hindrance to marriage than any social bar. He had acted according to his faith, and he was not shaken from it because he had so keenly suffered for it.

After a time Hannah's sorrow wore itself out, or was blotted out by others following—her father's death, and the dispersion of the family. There was no mother living; but there were three sisters at first, then two, then only one,—her quiet, solitary self. For her great grief had left upon her an ineffaceable impression—not exactly of melancholy, but of exceeding quietness and settled loneliness of heart. She said to herself, 'I never can suffer more than I have suffered;' and thenceforward all vicissitudes of fate became level to her—at least, she thought so then.

Such was her story. It had never been very pub-

lie, and nobody ever talked of it or knew it now. Lady Dunsmore had not the least idea of it, or she would not have ended their conversation as she did.

‘Good-bye now, and remember you have my best wishes—ay, even if you marry your brother-in-law. It is not nearly so bad as marrying your cousin. But I beg your pardon; my tongue runs away with me. All I mean to say, seriously, is that, my husband being one of those who uphold the bill for legalising such marriages, I am well up on the subject, and we both earnestly hope they will be legalised in time.’

‘Whether or not, it cannot concern me,’ said Miss Thelluson gently.

‘The remedying of a wrong concerns everybody a little—at least I think so. How society can forbid a man’s marrying his wife’s sister, who is no blood-relation at all, and yet allow him to marry his cousin—a proceeding generally unwise, and sometimes absolutely wicked—I cannot imagine. But forgive me again; I speak earnestly, for I feel earnestly.’

‘I am sure of it,’ said Miss Thelluson.

She was a little paler than usual; but that was all; and when she had parted, quite affectionately, from her pupils’ mother, she went and sat in her own little room as quiet as ever, except that she once or twice turned round on her third finger its familiar ring, the great red carbuncle, like a drop of blood, which had belonged to her cousin Arthur.

‘What a fancy of the countess’s, to call me “young,” and suggest my marrying!’ thought she, with a faint, sad smile. ‘No, I shall never marry anybody; and therefore it is kind of Heaven thus to make a home for me, and, above all, to send me a child. A child of my very own almost; for she will never remember any mother but me. How I wish she might call me mother! However, that would not do, perhaps. I must be content with “auntie.” But I shall have her all to myself, nevertheless, and perhaps Mr. Rivers

may marry again, and then I would ask him to give her up wholly to me. Only to think, me with a child!—a little thing trotting after me and laughing in my face—a big girl growing up beside me, a grown-up daughter to comfort my old age—oh, what a happy woman I should be!’

So pondered she—this lonely governess, this ‘old maid,’ whose love-dreams were long ago vanished—and began unawares to let the past slip behind her and look forward to the future; to build and freight with new hopes that tiny ship—she that had never thought to put to sea again—to set her empty heart, with all its capacity of loving, upon what? A baby six months old!

## CHAPTER II.

A HOUSE on a hill. It has its advantages, and its disadvantages. It is hard to climb to, and harder to descend from. Everywhere round about you may see from it; but then everybody round about can see you. It is like the city set on a hill, it cannot be hid. Its light shines far; but then the blacker is its darkness. However, one need not carry out the metaphor, which speaks for itself.

Hannah Thelluson’s ideal of a house had always been a house on a hill. She had a curious dislike to living, either physically or morally, upon low ground. She wanted plenty of breathing-room: space around her and over her: freedom to look abroad on the earth and up to the sky. And though her nature was neither ambitious nor overbearing, she experienced even yet a childish delight in getting to the top of things, in surmounting and looking down upon difficulties, and in feeling that there was nothing beyond her,—nothing unconquered between herself and the sky. At least, that is the nearest description of a sentiment that was

quite indescribable, and yet as real as intangible fancies often are.

Therefore it had given her a certain sensation of pleasure to hear that Mr. Rivers had removed from his house in the village, the associations of which he found it impossible to bear, to another, on the top of Easterham Hill, or Down, as it was generally called, being a high open space, breezy and bright. On it he was building a few cottages—a cottage convalescent hospital he meant it to be—in memory of his late wife.

‘I had planned a marble monument,’ he wrote to Hannah, ‘a recumbent figure of herself, life-size, with two angels watching at head and foot. But I found this would cost nearly as much as the cottage, and it struck me that Rosa would have liked something that was not only a memorial of the dead, but a blessing to the living.’

Hannah agreed with him, and that little circumstance gave her a favourable impression of her brother-in-law. She was also touched by the minute arrangements he made for her journey, a rather long one, and her reception at its end. Some of his plans failed—he was not able to meet her himself, being sent for suddenly to the Moat-House—but the thoughtful kindness remained, and Miss Thelluson was grateful.

She wound slowly up the hill in her brother-in-law’s comfortable carriage, and descended at his door, the door of a much grander house than she expected—till she remembered that since Rosa’s death Mr. Rivers’s income had been doubled by succeeding to the fortune of a maternal uncle. With him, wealth accumulated upon wealth, as it seems to do with some people; perhaps, alas! as a balance-weight against happiness.

Miss Thelluson asked herself this question, in a sad kind of way, when she entered the handsome modern house—very modern it seemed to her, who had been living in old castles these two years, and very luxurious too. She wondered much whether she should feel at

home here; able to be happy herself, or make the widower happy—the forlorn man, who had every blessing in life except the crowning one of all, a good wife: the ‘gift that cometh from the Lord.’ He had had it, and it had been taken away. Was this worse or better for him? Hannah thought, with a compassion for the living that almost lessened her grief for the dead, how desolate he must often feel, sitting down to his solitary meals, wandering through his empty garden—Rosa had so loved a garden—and back again to his silent room. How at every step, in everything about him, he must miss his wife. A loss sharper even than that one—the sharpness of which she knew so well. But then, she and Arthur had never been married.

‘I must try and help him as much as I can—my poor brother-in-law!’ thought she to herself as she came into the dreary house; all the more dreary because it was such a handsome house; and then she thought no more either of it or its master. For did it not contain what was infinitely more interesting to her—the baby?

Some people will smile at what I am going to say: and yet it is truth,—a truth always solemn, sometimes rather sad likewise. There are women in whom mother-love is less an instinct or an affection than an actual passion—as strong as, sometimes even stronger than, the passion of love itself; to whom the mere thought of little hands and little feet—especially ‘*my* little hands, *my* little feet,’ in that fond appropriation with which one poet-mother puts it—gives a thrill of ecstasy as keen as any love-dreams. This, whether or not they have children of their own; often, poor women! when they are lonely old maids. And such a one was Hannah Thelluson.

As she entered the house (I feel the confession is more pathetic than ridiculous) she actually trembled with the delight of thinking that in a minute more

she would have her little niece in her arms; and her first question was, 'Where is the baby?'

Apparently a question quite unexpected from any visitor in this house; for the footman, much surprised, passed it to the butler, and the butler circulated it somewhere in the inferior regions: whence presently there appeared a slatternly female servant.

'I am Miss Thelluson, baby's aunt. I want to see my little niece.'

Upon this the slatternly girl led the way up a steep stair to the nursery. It was a long, low, gloomy room, which struck chilly on entering, even in full summer, for its only window looked north-east, and was shaded by an overhanging tree. It had in perfection the close nursery atmosphere of the old school, whose chiefest horror seemed to be fresh air. Sunless, smothery, dull, and cold, it was the last place in the world for any young life to grow up in. It cast a weight even upon the grown woman, who loved light and air, and would never, either physically or mentally, willingly walk in the gloom.

Miss Thelluson contemplated sadly that small pale effigy of a child, which lay in the little crib, with the last evening light slanting across it through a carelessly drawn curtain. It lay, not in the lovely attitudes that sleeping children often assume, but flat upon its back, its arms stretched out cruciform, and its tiny feet extended straight out, almost like a dead child. There was neither roundness nor colouring in the face, and very little beauty. Only a certain pathetic peace, not unlike the peace of death.

'Don't touch her,' whispered Miss Thelluson, as the nurse was proceeding roughly to take up her charge. 'Never disturb a sleeping child. I will wait till to-morrow.'

And she stood and looked at it—this sole relic of poor Rosa; this tiny creature, which was all that was left of the Thelluson race, notable and honourable in



its day, though long dwindled down into poverty and obscurity.

As she looked, there came into Hannah's heart that something—mothers say they feel it at the instant when God makes them living mothers of a living babe; and perhaps He puts it into the hearts of other women, not mothers at all, in solemn, exceptional cases, and for holy ends—that passionate instinct of protection, tenderness, patience, self-denial; of giving everything and expecting nothing back, which constitutes the true ideal of maternity. She did not lift the child; she would not allow herself even to kiss its little curled-up fingers, for fear of waking it, but she consecrated herself to it from that moment,—as only women and mothers can, and do.

Nurse, who disliked her authority being set aside, approached again. 'Never mind waking it, miss. It only cries a bit, and goes off to sleep again.'

But Hannah held her arm. 'No, no!' she said, rather sharply; 'I will not have the child disturbed. I can wait. It is *my* child.'

And she sat down on the rocking-chair by the crib-side with the air of one who knew her own rights, and was determined to have them. All her nervous doubt of herself, her hesitation and timidity, vanished together; the sight before her seemed to make her strong;—strong as the weakest creatures are when the maternal instinct comes into them. At the moment, and for ever henceforth, Hannah felt that she could have fought like any wild beast for the sake of that little helpless babe.

She sat a long while beside it; long enough to take in pretty clearly the aspect of things around her. Though she was an old maid, or considered herself so, she had had a good deal of experience of family life in the various nurseries of friends and employers; upon which her strong common sense and quick observation had made many internal comments. She

detected at once here that mournful lack of the mother's eye and hand; the mother's care and delight in making all things orderly and beautiful for the opening intelligence of her darling. It was quite enough to look around the room to feel sure that the little sleeper before her was nobody's darling. Cared for, of course, up to a certain extent, in a stupid, mechanical way; but there was nobody to take up, with full heart, the burden of motherhood, and do the utmost for the little human being who, physiologists say, bears in body and soul the impress of its first two years of life with it to the grave.

'And this duty falls to me; God has given it to me,' said Hannah Thelluson to herself. And without a moment's questioning, or considering how far the labour might outweigh the reward, or indeed whether the reward would ever come at all, she added solemnly, 'Thank God!'

'I shall be here again before bed-time,' said she aloud to the nurse as she rose.

'You can't, miss,' returned the woman, evidently bent on resistance; 'I always goes to bed early, and I locks my nursery-door after I've gone to bed.'

'That will not do,' said Miss Thelluson. 'I am baby's aunt, as you know, and her father has given her into my charge. The nursery must never be locked against me day or night. Where is the key?' She took it out of the door and put it into her pocket, the nurse looking too utterly astonished to say a word. 'I shall be back here again punctually at half-past nine.'

'My first battle!' she thought, sighing, as she went away to her own room. She was not fond of battles; still she could fight—when there was something worth fighting for; and even her first hour in the widower's household was sufficient to show her that the mistress of it would require to have eyes like Argus, and a heart as firm as a rock. This was natural; like everything else, quite natural: but it was not the less hard,

and it did not make her home-coming to the House on the Hill more cheerful.

It was a new house comparatively, and everything about it was new. Nothing could be more different from the old-fashioned stateliness in which she had lived at Lord Dunsmore's. But then there she was a stranger; this was home. She glanced through the house in passing, and tried to admire it, for it was her brother-in-law's own property, only lately bought. Not that he liked it—he had told her mournfully that he neither liked nor disliked anything much now—but it was the most suitable house he could find.

She went out into the garden, and wept out a heartful of tears in the last gleam of the twilight, then she came back and dressed for the seven o'clock dinner, for which the maid—who appeared at the door, saying she had been specially ordered to attend on Miss Thelluson—told her Mr. Rivers was sure to return.

'The first time master ever has returned, miss, to a regular late dinner, since the poor mistress died.'

This, too, was a trial. As Hannah descended, attired with her usual neatness, but in the thorough middle-aged costume that she had already assumed, there flashed across her a vision of poor Rosa, the last time, though they little knew it was the last, that she ran into her sister's room just before dinner; all in white, her round rosy arms and neck gleaming under the thin muslin, so happy herself, and brightening all around her with her loving, lovesome ways. And now, a mile distant, Rosa slept under the daisies. How did her husband endure the thought?

With one great sob Hannah smothered down these remembrances. They would make the approaching meeting more than painful—intolerable. She felt as if the first minute she looked into her brother-in-law's face and grasped his hand, both would assuredly break down, although over both had grown the outside composure of a six-months-old sorrow.

He himself seemed in dread of a 'scene,' and watchful to avoid it, for instead of meeting her in the drawing-room, she found him waiting for her at the stair-foot, under the safe shelter of all the servants' eyes.

'I am late,' he said; 'I must apologise.'

Then they shook hands. Mr. Rivers's hand was trembling, and very cold, but that was all. He said nothing more, and led her at once into the dining-room.

In such circumstances, how dreadful sometimes are little things—the little things that unconsciously crop up, stinging like poisoned arrows. There was one—Hannah recalled it long afterwards, and so did others—dwelling malignly upon the innocent, publicly-uttered, kindly words.

The table had been laid for two persons, master and mistress, and the butler held for Miss Thelluson the mistress's chair. Struck with a sudden pang, she hesitated—glanced towards Mr. Rivers.

'Take it,' he said, in a smothered kind of voice; 'it is your place now. I hope you will keep it always.' So she sat down, in Rosa's seat; with Rosa's husband opposite. How terrible for him to see another face in the stead of that dear, lovely one over which the coffin-lid had closed! It was her duty, and she went through it; but she felt all dinner-time as if sitting upon thorns.

During the safe formalities of the meal, she had leisure to take some observation of her brother-in-law. He was greatly altered. There had passed over him that great blow—the first grief of a lifetime; and it had struck him down as a man of naturally buoyant temperament usually is struck by any severe shock—sinking under it utterly. Even as sometimes those whom in full health disease has smitten, die quicker than those who have been long inured to sickness and suffering.

His sister-in-law observed him compassionately but sharply; more sharply than she had ever done before. The marriage having been all settled without her, she had not to criticise but to accept him as Rosa's choice, and had actually only seen him twice—on the wedding-day, and the one brief visit afterwards. She had noticed him little until now. But now, when they were to live together as brother and sister; when he expected her to be his friend and companion, daily and hourly; to soothe him and sympathise with him, put up with all his moods and humours, consult him on all domestic matters, and, in short, stand to him in the closest relation that any woman can stand to any man, unless she is his mother or his wife, the case was altered. It behoved her to find out, as speedily as possible, what sort of man Mr. Rivers was.

He had a handsome face, and yet—this 'yet' is not so unfair as it seems—it was likewise a good face; full of feeling and expression. A little feminine, perhaps—he was like his mother, the first Lady Rivers, who had been a very beautiful woman; and once Hannah had thought it boyishly bright—too bright to interest her much, but it was not so now. The sunshine had all gone out of it, yet it had not attained the composed dignity of grief. Irritable, restless, gloomy, morbid, he seemed in that condition into which a naturally good-tempered man is prone to fall when some great shock has upset his balance, and made him the exact opposite of what he once was—hating everything and everybody about him, and himself most of all.

Hannah sighed as she listened, though trying not to listen, to his fault-finding with the servants, sometimes *sotto voce*, sometimes barely restrained by his lingering sense of right from breaking out into actual anger—he who was, Rosa used to assert, the sweetest-tempered man, the most perfect gentleman, in all the world. Yet even his crossness was pathetic—like the

naughtiness of a sick child, who does not know what is the matter with him. Hannah felt so sorry for him! She longed to make excuse for these domestic delinquencies, and tell him she would soon put all right; as she knew she could, having been her father's housekeeper when she was a girl of sixteen.

She was bold enough faintly to hint this, when they got into the drawing-room, where some trivial neglect had annoyed him excessively, much more than it deserved; and she offered to rectify it.

'Will you really? Will you take all these common household cares upon yourself?'

'It is a woman's business; and I like it.'

'So *she* used to say. She used constantly to be longing for you, and telling me how comfortable everything was when her sister was housekeeper at home. She—she——'

It was the first time the desolate man had ventured off the safe track of commonplace conversation, and though he only spoke of Rosa as '*she*,'—it seemed impossible to him to call her by her name—the mere reference to his dead wife was more than he could bear. All the flood-gates of his grief burst open.

'Isn't this a change?—a terrible, terrible change?' he cried, looking up to Hannah with anguish in his eyes. A child's anguish could not have been more appealing, more utterly undisguised. And, sitting down, he covered his face with his hands, and wept—also like a child.

Hannah wept too, but not with such a passionate abandonment; it was against her nature, woman though she was. Her own long-past sorrow, which, she fancied, most resembled his, and had first drawn her to him with a strange sympathy, had been a grief totally silent. From the day of Arthur's death she never mentioned her cousin's name. Consolation she had neither asked nor received from any human being—this sort of affliction could not be comforted.

Therefore she scarcely understood, at first, how Bernard Rivers, when the seal was once broken, poured out the whole story of his loss in a continuous stream. For an hour or more he sat beside her, talking of Rosa's illness and death, and all he had suffered; then going over and over again, with a morbid intensity, his brief, happy married life; apparently finding in this overflow of heart the utmost relief, and even alleviation.

Hannah listened, somewhat surprised, but still she listened. The man and the woman were as unlike as they well could be; yet, thus thrown together—bound together, as it were, by the link of a common grief, their very dissimilarity, and the necessity it involved of each making allowances for, and striving heartily not to misjudge, the other, produced a certain mutual interest, which rendered even their first sad evening not quite so sad as it might have been.

After a while, Hannah tried to lure Mr. Rivers out of his absorbing and pitiaibly self-absorbed grief into a few practical matters; for she was anxious to get as clear an idea as she could of her own duties in the household and the parish: her duties only; her position, and her rights—if she had any—would, she knew, fall into their fitting places by-and-by.

‘Yes, I have a large income,’ said Mr. Rivers, sighing; ‘far too large for me and that poor little baby. She would have enjoyed it, and spent it wisely and well. You shall spend it instead. You shall have as much money as you want, weekly or monthly; just as she had. Oh, how clever she was! how she used to bring me her books to reckon over, and make such fun out of them, and fall into such pretty despair if they were the least bit wrong. My own Rosa!—my merry, happy wife!—yes, I know I made her happy! She told me so,—almost her last words.’

‘Thank God for that!’

‘I do.’

Hannah tried to put into the heart-stricken man the belief—essentially a woman's—that a perfect love, even when lost, is still an eternal possession—a pain so sacred that its deep peace often grows into absolute content. But he did not seem to understand this at all. His present loss—the continually aching want—the daily craving for love, and help, and sympathy—these were all he felt, and felt with a keenness indescribable. How could the one ever be filled up and the other supplied?

Hannah could not tell. She grew frightened at the responsibility she had undertaken. A kind of hopelessness came over her; she almost wished herself safe back again in the quiet school-room with her little Ladies Dacre. There, at least, she knew all her duties, and could fulfil them; here they already seemed so complicated that how she should first get them clear, and then perform them, was more than she knew. However, it was not her way to meet evils beforehand, or to try and put more than the day's work into the day. She was old enough to have ceased to struggle after the impossible.

So she sat watching, with a pity almost motherly, the desolate man, with whom, it seemed, for a time at least, her lot was cast; inwardly praying that she might have strength to do her duty by him, and secretly hoping that it might not be for long, that his grief, by its very wildness, might wear itself out; and the second marriage, which Lady Dunsmore had prognosticated as the best thing which could happen to him, might gradually come about.

'Rosa would have wished it—even Rosa,' the sister thought, choking down a not unnatural pang, 'could she see him as I see him now.'

It was a relief to catch an excuse for a few minutes' absence;—she took out her watch, and told her brother-in-law it was time to go up to the nursery.



‘Nurse does not like it—I see that; but still I must go. Every night before I sleep I must take my latest peep at baby.’

‘Ah, that reminds me—I have never asked you what you think of baby. I don’t know how it is—I fear you will think me very wicked,’ added the widower, sighing, ‘but I cannot take the interest I ought to take in that poor child. I suppose men don’t care for babies—not at first—and then her birth cost me so much!’

‘It was God’s will things should be thus,’ answered Hannah gravely. ‘It should not make you dislike your child—Rosa’s child.’

‘God forbid!—only that I cannot feel as I ought to feel towards the poor little thing.’

‘You will in time.’ And Hannah tried to draw a picture such as might touch any father’s heart—of his wee girl toddling after him; his big girl taking his hand, and beginning to ask him questions; his sweet, grown-up girl becoming his housekeeper, companion, and friend.

Mr. Rivers only shook his head. ‘Ah, but that is a long time to wait. I want a friend and companion now. How am I ever to get through these long, lonely years!’

‘God will help you,’ said Hannah solemnly, and then felt half ashamed, remembering she was preaching to a clergyman. But he was a man, too, with all a man’s weaknesses, every one of which she was sure to find out ere long. Even already she had found out a good many. Evidently he was of a warm, impulsive, affectionate nature, sure to lay upon her all his burdens. She would have the usual lot of sisters, to share most of the cares and responsibilities of a wife, without a wife’s blessings or a wife’s love.

‘I must go now. Good night,’ she said.

‘Good night? Nay, surely you are coming back to me again? You don’t know what a relief it has

been to talk to you. You cannot tell how terrible to me are these long, lonely evenings.'

A moan, to Hannah incomprehensible ; for her solitude had no terrors—never had had. In early youth she would sit and dream for hours of the future—a future which never came. Now she had done with dreaming ; the present sufficed her—and the past. She liked thinking of her dear ones living, her still dearer ones dead, and found in their peaceful, unseen companionship all she required. Never was there a person less dependent on outward society. And yet when she had it she rather enjoyed it—only she never craved after it, nor was it any necessity of her existence. On such women, who themselves can stand alone, others always come and lean—men especially.

As Miss Thelluson quitted him, Mr. Rivers looked after her with those restless, miserable eyes of his, from which the light of happiness seemed fled for ever.

'Pray come back soon,' he said, imploringly. 'I do so hate my own company.'

'Poor man ! How sad it would be if we women felt the same !' thought Hannah. And she, who understood, and could endure, not only solitude but sorrow, took some comfort to herself ;—a little more, also, in the hope of imparting comfort.

A child asleep ! Painters draw it ; poets sing about it ; yet the root of its mystery remains a mystery still. About it seem to float the secrets of earth and heaven—life and death : whence we come, and whither we go : what God does with and in us, and what He expects us to do for ourselves. It is as if, while we gaze, we could catch drifting past us a few threads of that wonderful web—which, in its entirety, He holds solely in His own hands.

Hannah Thelluson looked on this sleeper of six months old with a feeling of not merely tenderness,

but awe. She listened to the soft breathing—which might have to draw its last sigh—who knows? perhaps eighty years hence, when she and all her generation were dead, buried, and forgotten. The solemnity of the charge she had undertaken came upon her tenfold. She stood in the empty nursery, apparently left deserted for hours, for the fire was out, and the candle flickered in its socket. Strange shadows came and went; among them one might almost imagine human shapes—perhaps the dead mother gliding in to look at her lonely child. Even as in some old ballad about a cruel stepmother—

‘The nicht was lang and the bairnies grat,  
Their mither she under the mools heard **that**.

‘She washed the tane and buskit her fair,  
She kamed and plaited the tither’s hair;’

and then reproached the new wife, saying—the words came vividly back upon Hannah’s mind—

‘I left ye candles and groff wax-light—  
My bairnies sleep i’ the mirk o’ night.

‘I left ye mony braw bolsters blae—  
My bairnies ligg i’ the bare strae.’

A notion pathetic in its very extravagance. To Hannah Thelluson it scarcely seemed wonderful that any mother should rise up from ‘under the mools,’ and come thus to the rescue of her children.

‘Oh, if this baby’s father ever brings home a strange woman to be unkind to her, what shall I do? Anything, I think, however desperate. Rosa, my poor Rosa, you may rest in peace! God do so to me, and more also, as the Bible says, if ever I forsake your child.’

While she spoke, half aloud, there was a tap at the door.

‘Come in, nurse.’ But it was not the nurse; it was the father.

‘I could not rest. I thought I would come too. They never will let me look at baby.’

‘Look then. Isn’t she sweet? See how her little fingers curl round her papa’s hand already.’

Mr. Rivers bent over the crib—not unmoved. ‘My poor little girl! Do you think, Aunt Hannah, that she will ever be fond of me?’

‘I am sure she will.’

‘Then I shall be so fond of her.’

Hannah smiled at the deduction. It was not her notion of loving—especially of loving a child. She had had enough to do with children to feel keenly the truth that, mostly, one has to give all and expect nothing—at least, for many years. But it was useless to say this, or to put any higher ideal of paternal affection into the young father’s head. He was so completely a young man still, she said to herself; and felt almost old enough, and experienced enough, to be his mother.

Nevertheless Mr. Rivers seemed much affected by the sight of his child, evidently rather a rare occurrence.

‘I think she is growing prettier,’ he said. ‘Anyhow, she looks very peaceful and sweet. I should like to take her and cuddle her, only she would wake and scream.’

‘I am afraid she would,’ said Hannah, smiling. ‘You had better go away. See, there comes nurse.’ Who entered, in somewhat indignant astonishment, at finding not only Miss Thelluson, but Mr. Rivers, intruding on her domains. Whereupon the latter, with true masculine cowardice, disappeared at once. But when Aunt Hannah—who accepted gladly the welcome name—rejoined him in the drawing-room, she found him pacing to and fro with agitated steps.

‘Come in, sister, my good sister. Tell me you don’t think me such a brute as I have been saying to myself I am. Else why should that woman have

thought it so extraordinary—my coming to look at my own child? But I do not mean to be a brute. I am only a miserable man, indifferent to everything in this mortal world. Tell me, shall I ever get out of this wretched state of mind? Shall I ever be able to endure my life again?’

What could Hannah say? or would there be any good in saying it? Can the experience of one heart teach another? or must each find out the lesson for itself? I fear so. Should she—as, with the strange want of reticence which men sometimes exhibit much more than we women, he poured forth the anguish of his life—should she open to him that long hidden and now healed, though never forgotten, woe of hers? But no! she could not. It was too sacred. All she found possible was gently to lead him back to their old subject of talk—commonplace, practical things—the daily interests and duties by which, as a clergyman, he was necessarily surrounded, and out of which he might take some comfort. She was sure he might if he chose: she told him so.

‘Oh, no,’ he said bitterly. ‘Comfort is vain. I am a broken-down man. I shall never be of any good to anybody! But you will take care of my house and my child. Do just as you fancy. Have everything your own way.’

‘In one thing I should like to have at once my own way,’ said she, rushing desperately upon a subject which she had been resolving on all the evening. ‘I want to change rooms with baby.’

‘Why? Is not yours comfortable? Those horrid servants of mine! I desired them to give you the pleasantest room in the house.’

‘So it is; and for that very reason baby ought to have it. A delicate child like her should live in sunshine, physically and morally, all day long. The nursery only catches the sun for half-an-hour in the day.’

‘How can you tell, when you have not been twelve hours in the house?’

She touched the tiny compass which hung at her watch-chain.

‘What a capital idea! What a very sensible woman you must be!’ And Mr. Rivers smiled—for the first time that evening. Miss Thelluson smiled too.

‘What would become of a governess if she were not sensible? Then I may have my way?’

‘Of course! Only—what shall I say to grand-mamma? She chose the nursery, and was quite content with it.’

‘Grandmamma is probably one of the old school, to whom light and air were quite unnecessary luxuries—nay, rather annoyances.’

‘Yet the old school brought up their children to be as healthy as ours.’

‘Because they were probably stronger than ours: we have to pay for the error of a prior generation; or else the strong ones only lived, the weakly were killed off pretty fast. But I beg your pardon. You set me on my hobby—a governess’s hobby—the bringing-up of the new generation. Besides, you know the proverb about the perfectness of old bachelors’ wives and old maids’ children.’

‘You are not like an old maid, and still less like a governess.’ He meant this for a compliment, but it was not accepted as such.

‘Nevertheless, I am both,’ answered Miss Thelluson gravely. ‘Nor am I ashamed of it either.’

‘Certainly not; there is nothing to be ashamed of,’ said Mr. Rivers, colouring. He could not bear in the smallest degree to hurt people’s feelings, and had painfully sensitive feelings of his own. Then came an awkward pause, after which conversation flagged to a considerable degree.

Hannah began to think, what in the wide world should she do if she and her brother-in-law had thus

to sit opposite to one another, evening after evening, through the long Winter's nights, thrown exclusively upon each other's society, bound to be mutually agreeable, or, at any rate, not disagreeable, yet lacking the freedom that exists between husband and wife, or brother and sister who have grown up together, and been used to one another all their lives. It was a position equally difficult and anomalous. She wished she had known Mr. Rivers more intimately during Rosa's lifetime; yet that would have availed her little, for even that intimacy would necessarily have been limited. A reticent woman never, under any circumstances, cares to be very familiar with another woman's husband, even though he be the husband of her own sister. She may like him sincerely, he may be to her a most true and affectionate friend, but to have his constant, exclusive society, day after day and evening after evening, she would either find extremely irksome—or, if she did not—God help her! Even under the most innocent circumstances such an attraction would be a sad—nay, a fatal thing, to both parties. People talk about open jealousies; but the secret heart-burnings that arise from misunderstood, half-misunderstood, or wholly false positions between men and women, are much worse. It is the unuttered sorrows, the unadmitted and impossible-to-be-avenged wrongs, which cause the sharpest pangs of existence.

Not that Miss Thelluson thought about these things; indeed, she was too much perplexed and bewildered by her new position to think much about anything beyond the moment, but she felt sufficiently awkward and uncomfortable to make her seize eagerly upon any convenient topic of conversation.

'Are they all well at the Moat-House? I suppose I shall have the pleasure of seeing some of your family to-morrow?'

'If—if you will take the trouble of calling there. I must apologise'—and he looked more apologetic

than seemed even necessary—‘I believe Lady Rivers ought to call upon you; but she is growing old now. You must make allowances.’

His was a tell-tale face. Hannah guessed at once that she would have a difficult part to play between her brother-in-law and his family. But she cared not. She seemed not to care much for anything or anybody now—except that little baby up-stairs.

‘One always makes allowances for old people,’ answered she gently.

‘And for young people, too,’ continued Mr. Rivers, with some anxiety. ‘My sisters are so gay—so careless-hearted—thoughtless, if you will.’

Hannah smiled. ‘I think I shall have too busy a life to be likely to see much of your sisters. And, I promise you, I will, as you say, “make allowances”—except in one thing.’ And there came a sudden flash into the deep-set grey eyes, which made Mr. Rivers start, and doubt if his sister-in-law was such a very quiet woman after all. ‘They must not interfere with me in my bringing-up of my sister’s child. There, I fear, they will find me a little—difficult.’

‘No; you will have no difficulty there,’ said he, hastily. ‘In truth, my people live too much a life of society to trouble themselves about domestic concerns, especially babies. They scarcely ever see Rosie; and when they do they always moan over her—say what a pity it is she wasn’t a boy, and that she is so delicate she will never be reared. But, please God, they may be mistaken.’

‘They shall,’ said Hannah, between her teeth; feeling that, if she could so bargain with Providence, she would gladly exchange ten or twenty years of her own pale life for that little life just beginning, the destiny of which none could foresee.

Mr. Rivers went on talking. It seemed such a relief to him to talk.



‘Of course, my father and they all would have liked a boy best. My eldest brother, you are aware—well, poor fellow, he grows worse instead of better. None of us ever see him now. I shall be the last of my name. A name which has descended in an unbroken line, they say, for centuries. We are supposed to have been De la Rivière, and to have come over with William the Conqueror. Not that I care much for this sort of thing.’ And yet he looked as if he did, a little; and, standing by his fireside, tall and handsome, with his regular Norman features, and well-knit Norman frame, he was not an unworthy representative of a race which must have had sufficient elements of greatness, physical and moral, to be able to keep itself out of obscurity all these centuries. ‘I am rather Whiggish myself; but Sir Austin is a Tory of the old school, and has certain crotchets about keeping up the family. Things are just a little hard for my father.’

‘What is hard? I beg your pardon—I am afraid I was not paying much attention to what you said just then. I thought,’ Hannah laughed and blushed a little, ‘I thought I heard the baby.’

Mr. Rivers laughed too. ‘The baby will be Aunt Hannah’s idol, I see that. Don’t spoil her, that is all. Grandmamma is always warning me that she must not be spoiled.’ Then seeing the same ominous flash in Miss Thelluson’s eye, he added, ‘Nay, nay; you shall have Rosie all to yourself, never fear. I am only too thankful to have you here. I hope you will make yourself happy. Preserve for me my fragile little flower, my only child, and I shall bless you all my days.’

Hannah silently extended her hand: her brother-in-law grasped it warmly. Tears stood in both their eyes, but still the worst of this meeting was over. They had reached the point when they could talk calmly of ordinary things, and consult together over

the motherless child, who was now first object to both. And though, whether the widower felt it or not, Hannah still felt poor Rosa's continual presence, as it were; heard her merry voice in pauses of conversation; saw the shadow of her dainty little form standing by her husband's side,—these remembrances she knew were morbid, and not to be encouraged. They would fade, and they ought to fade, gradually and painlessly, in the busy anxieties of real life. Which of us, in dying, would wish it to be otherwise? Would we choose to be to our beloved a perpetually aching grief, or a tender, holy memory? I think, the latter. Hannah, who knew something about sorrow, thought so too.

'Good night,' she said, rising not regretfully the instant the clock struck ten. 'I am an early bird, night and morning. Shall you object to that? No house goes well unless the mistress is early in the morning.'

The moment she had said the word she would have given anything to unsay it. That sweet, dead mistress, who used to come fluttering down-stairs like a white bird, with a face fresh as a rose,—would the time ever come when her husband had forgotten her?

Not now, at any rate. 'Yes,' he answered, with evident pain; 'yes; you are the mistress here now. I put you exactly in her place,—to manage everything as she did. She would wish it so. Oh, if we only had her back again!—just for one week, one day! But she never will come back any more!'

He turned away; the forlorn man whom God had smitten with the heaviest sorrow, the sharpest loss, that a man can know. What consolation could Hannah offer him? None, except the feeble one that, in some measure, she could understand his grief; because over her love too the grave had closed. For a moment she thought she would say this; but her lips, when

she opened them, seemed paralysed. Not yet, at any rate,—not yet. Not till she knew him better, and, perhaps, he her.

So she only took his hand, and again said ‘Good night;’ adding softly, ‘God bless you and yours!’

‘He has blessed us in sending Aunt Hannah to take care of us.’

And so that first evening, which she had looked forward to with no small dread, was over and done.

But long after Hannah had retired, she heard her brother-in-law walking about the house, with restless persistency, opening and shutting door after door, then ascending to his own room with weary steps, and locking himself in—not to sleep, for he had told her that he often lay awake till dawn. She did not sleep either; her thoughts were too busy, and the change in her monotonous life too sudden and complete for anything like repose.

She sat at her window and looked out. It was a goodly night, and the moon made everything bright as day. All along the hill-top was a clear view, but the valley below was filled with mist, under which its features, whether beautiful or not, were utterly indistinguishable. That great white sea of vapour looked as mysterious as the to-morrow into which she could not penetrate; the new life, full of new duties and ties, now opening before her just when she thought all were ended. It interested her a little. She wondered vaguely how things would turn out, just as she wondered how the valley, hid under the misty sea, would look at six o’clock next morning. But soon her mind went back, as it always did in the moonlight, to her own silent past—her own people, her father, mother, sisters, all dead and buried—to her lost Arthur, with whom life too was quite done. He seemed to be saying to her, not near, for he had been dead so long that even his memory had grown phantom-like and far away, but whispering from some

distant sphere, words she had read somewhere the other day—

‘O maid most dear, I am not here,  
I have no place, no part:  
No dwelling more on sea or shore —  
But only in thy heart.’

‘In my heart! in my heart!’ she repeated to herself, and thought how impossible it was that any living love could ever have supplanted—ever should supplant—the dead.

### CHAPTER III.

THIS is no sensational or exceptional history, but one that might happen—does happen—continually. The persons herein described are just ordinary people, neither ideally good nor extraordinary bad. Not so weak as to be the mere sport of circumstances, yet human enough to be influenced thereby, as we all are. In short, neither heroes nor heroines, but men and women—the men and women of whom society is mainly composed, and for which government has to legislate.

Hannah Thelluson was no heroine, Bernard Rivers no hero; and they had not lived many days under the same roof before they made that common discovery—more especially as they had plenty of spare time in which to make it; for, the fine Autumn melting in continuous rain, no visitors came near the House on the Hill. Not even from the Moat-House. Miss Thelluson had called there, as she promised; but the family were out driving. Next day a footman brought her the cards of Lady and the Misses Rivers, with an apology for not calling, on account of the rain.

‘They will ask you to dinner next; my people are very particular on points of etiquette,’ observed Mr. Rivers, evidently annoyed.

But Hannah was not annoyed at all. Not even when the invitation never came, and the rain cleared up; yet somehow or other she had been nearly three weeks at Easterham without having once met her brother-in-law's family.

Of Mr. Rivers himself she had enough and to spare. It is a severe trial for any two people to be thrown on one another's exclusive society—at meal-times and all other times that politeness requires—striving in a hopeless manner to make conversation, eager to find out and seize upon the smallest point of mutual interest which will break the dull monotony of the time. What they were to her brother-in-law Hannah could not tell, but to her the first four days seemed like fourteen.

It was not from the dulness, which she would have put up with, being a very patient woman; but Mr. Rivers sometimes vexed her exceedingly. His desultory, lazy way of hanging about the house; his variableness; his irritability; and, above all, his indifference and carelessness about everybody and everything, were—to a woman who all her life had found plenty to do, and if she could not find work, made it—utterly incomprehensible.

‘But I suppose it is because I am a woman, and have never been used to live with any man—except my father, and he was not a man, he was an angel!’

So she argued with herself, and ‘did her duty,’ as she considered it, to the full; placing herself at Mr. Rivers's beck and call every hour in the day, following him about obediently, as he evidently liked to be followed, for his craving after sympathy and his horror of solitude were almost painful to witness; in short, trying to devote herself to him as a nurse does to a sickly, naughty child—naughty because sickly. But she did not enjoy this task. His unhappy, restless face made her heart ache; his aimless, useless life afflicted her conscience. A man, a father, a clergyman, surely

he was made for better things. If Heaven had taken away his delights, his duties still were left him. He ought to rouse himself.

And one day, driven almost to desperation by the way in which he had done nothing hour after hour but moon about and 'bother' her, as an idle, melancholy man does bother a busy woman—and Hannah had not been twenty-four hours in that chaotic, headless house before her head and hands were quite full of business—she ventured to hint this.

'Work!' he answered. 'I have no work; nothing that I care to do. She always did everything with me; we went about the parish together; she used to call herself my curate in petticoats; and the curate was much more useful than the vicar, I believe. Oh, Hannah! you knew what she was, but you never knew what she was to me!'

A tender idealization, perhaps; but the sister felt it deeply. Every memory of poor Rosa was most sacred to her heart too.

'But,' she reasoned, 'is there nothing you could do, if only for Rosa's sake? She could not bear to see the parish neglected, as you say it is. She would like you to look after the poor and the sick, and carry them comfort.'

'I carry comfort!'

'Those can, who have known sorrow.'

The widower looked at her, uncomprehendingly, with his wild, wistful, miserable eyes—this woman so quiet, so gentle, yet somewhat sad too.

'You have known sorrow?'

'I have.'

'Can you teach me how to bear mine?'

What she answered was very little; but it was to the purpose, something like what the Lord said to the man sick of palsy—what He says to every man who is sinking under the paralysis of grief, 'Rise up and walk!' She told him, in plain words that, instead of

sitting at home to mourn, he ought to go out and work.

‘I would, only I have no heart to go alone. There is an endless number of parish visits due—where she always went with me. If——’

He hesitated. Hannah hesitated too. It seemed usurping so pointedly the place of the dead; and yet—that dreary, helpless, appealing look of the lonely man!

‘If you like—that is, if you do not dislike my coming, and I can be of any use to you——’

‘Would you go with me? That would be so very kind. Only this muddy, damp day——’

‘Oh, I never mind mud or rain!’

‘Nor trouble, nor fatigue, nor anything else unpleasant, so long as you can do a kindness. She always said so, and now I have found it out for myself.’

Hannah smiled. Until now she had no idea whether her brother-in-law liked her or not, and she was not above the pleasantness of being liked. ‘Suppose, then, I go and put on my bonnet at once?’ And as she did so she caught a sight of her own face in the glass smiling. ‘If he likes me I may get some influence over him, so as to make my duty easier. And I will try to see his faults less plainly, and his good points more plainly, as people should who are obliged to live together. How shall I be able to teach my little girlie to love her father if I do not love him myself a little? I may in time!’

And she went down-stairs with a more cheerful heart.

After that, nearly every day, she and ‘the parson’ went out together, and he made her acquainted with all the poor people in the village. Only the poor; the few big houses there were taking their cue from the biggest of all—the Moat-House—or from some other mysterious reason, into which Miss Thelluson did not care to penetrate, but which apparently annoyed

Mr. Rivers a good deal—of these she saw nothing. They did not call.

Little she cared! Every minute of her day was occupied. Household affairs, parish work, the endless help that her brother-in-law soon came to expect from her; often Hannah smiled to herself at finding that before her new life had lasted twenty days, she was growing a busier woman than ever—too busy to heed outside things. Besides, in addition to all this, there had come over her a change which made her feel as if outside things never could affect her any more. She had fallen in love.

Smile not, readers, masculine readers especially, who think that we women can fall in love with nothing but your noble selves. The object of Hannah's passion was only—a baby!

People say that babies are all alike; but it is to those who do not discriminate them or love them, who take no interest in that wonderful and most pathetic sight—the growth of a human soul. Ay, and a child's soul begins to grow almost as soon as it is born. Within three months—mothers know—you can almost see it growing. At least in most children.

Now, at nine months old, little Rosie Rivers was an actual individual character, with an individual soul. It had shone out of her eyes, that very first morning when she opened and fixed them on her aunt, who sat beside her, watching for her waking. And when Hannah took the little white bundle in her arms, Rosie first drew herself back, and with grave, sad, appealing eyes, intently contemplated the stranger. 'Who are you? What do you want with me? Are you going to be kind to me?' said the mute little face, as plainly as any words. Then, as if satisfied with her investigation, she slowly dropped her head on her aunt's shoulder, and Hannah pressed her passionately to her breast.

Thus they fell in love—the woman and the child—



and the love grew day by day in a miraculous—no ! in not any miraculous way. Children have a heavenly instinct in finding good people and people that love them, in whom they may safely trust. Ere two days were over Rosie would leave anybody to go to her aunt's arms. As for Hannah, she could not get enough of her felicity. Had she not longed for this, ay, ever since she had dressed up her big doll in her own half-worn baby-clothes, and caressed it with all a mother's devotedness, at eleven years old ? To have a baby—a baby of her very own, as it were—for nurse had given warning at once—it was perfect content. Every minute that she could steal from Rosie's father she gave to the child ;—she would have liked to be in the nursery all day long. When wearied out with Mr. Rivers's restlessness, saddened by his gloomy face, she would fly for refuge to that sunshiny room—her own room—which she had made as cosy and pretty as she could, and find it a heaven of peace ; for the bright little face, the happy little voice, were something nearer heaven than anything her life had as yet ever known.

It might not have been the same with all children ; but the poor motherless Rosie was a very original child. Small, quiet, gentle, pale, there was yet in the baby-mouth a firm little will of its own, and in the serious eyes a strange out-looking, as if seeing something grown-up people could not see—seeking, perhaps, the mother she was never to know. Very soon Hannah learnt to think that tiny face unlike all the faces she had ever beheld. Not that it was pretty—poor Rosie was wholly unworthy, physically, of her handsome father and beautiful mother—but it had such a world of changeful meanings in it ; it was such a wonderful thing to study and marvel over. In its peaceful, heavenly dumbness it seemed to come to the lonely, shut-up woman like a face out of the unknown world.

Such a companion Rosie was too! Miss Thelluson was accustomed to big pupils, and fond as she was of children, they sometimes worried her: but this soft, silent creature, with its pretty ways, its speechless yet intelligible wants, only soothed her, and that inexpressibly. She would sit or lie for hours on the nursery floor with Rosie crowing over her, investigating her watch, her keys, her hair, her dress, with that endless pursuit of knowledge under difficulties peculiar to infants who are just catching hold of the key of mystery which unlocks to them the marvellous visible world.

And the world invisible—even that seemed to be very near about this little child. The words, ‘In heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven,’ were always coming into Hannah’s mind; and the awful punishment of those who sin against ‘one of these little ones,’ seemed to be only natural and just.

‘You seem very fond of that baby,’ said Mr. Rivers one day when she had tried to make it an attractive drawing-room guest for about a quarter of an hour.

‘Fond of’—what an idle, unmeaning word! Why, Rosie was a treasure that one of God’s angels had dropped into her arms straight from the Father’s house, and bade her cherish it and make it into an immortal soul, fit for His kingdom on earth, which is one with His kingdom in heaven. This was how Hannah felt when she watched the child. But she said nothing. How could Mr. Rivers, or any man, understand? Who could put into any father’s face the mother-look of the Virgin Mary?

As she stood there, with Rosie leaning across her shoulder, and patting auntie’s cheek with that little dimpled hand, Mr. Rivers, who had travelled half over Europe, and knew every Madonna by heart, called her to look at herself, for she and the child were just the picture of a certain Holy Family he named.

The colour came painfully into Hannah's cheek. She, too, like Mary, could have sung her Magnificat; all to herself—her quiet, lonely self. What had she done that Heaven should send her this blessing—she, a solitary woman of thirty years old? As she carried away little Rosie—who was quite too much for papa, except in the character of a Raffaellesque *bambino*, and for about the space of ten minutes—she clasped the child passionately to her heart. It had never beat so warmly, so hopefully, since her Arthur died.

This was on a Sunday morning, the first sunshiny Sunday since her arrival, and as Miss Thelluson and her brother-in-law walked together through the bright-looking village, all the neighbours turned out in their best clothes to go to church and criticise the stranger. Easterham was a sufficiently small place for everybody to know everybody; and Hannah was fully aware she was running the gauntlet of innumerable eyes, — ‘upper-class’ eyes: among the poor she was already well known. But this was the first time she had taken her public place in the parish—the first time, for many a long year, that she had walked to church arm-in-arm (country-fashion, he offered his and she accepted it) with a man, and a man that belonged to her. It felt—not exactly uncomfortable, but—strange.

Her brother-in-law, however, seemed quite at ease, and every person who came up to speak to him he carefully introduced to ‘my sister—Miss Thelluson.’ Sometimes it was ‘sister-in-law,’ but always pointedly ‘sister.’

‘He is not in the least ashamed of me—no more than he was of his wife,’ thought she, with a certain comfort. For if she had been much given to mind outside things it might have struck her that this handsome young man, with his Norman ancestry, his easy fortune, and his position as heir-presumptive to one of the first families in the county, was a strong

contrast to a quiet, rather old-fashioned governess—even though she was his wife's sister. But if she had also been a duchess he could not have shown her more tender politeness, and Hannah was grateful.

It was only when he looked towards the wicket-gate which divided the church from the Moat-House, of which it seemed originally to have been a mere appurtenance, that his countenance fell.

'I see my people coming. We must stop and speak to them. It will be best, as you sit in the same pew, and as—as we may have to go to lunch. They generally expect me on Sunday.'

'But not me—oh, I hope not. I want to be at home to give Rosie her dinner.' And Hannah, with a nervousness for which she despised herself, shrank back from the fashionable elderly lady and her four fashionable daughters, who seemed to fill up the whole of the yew avenue, quite shutting out little old Sir Austin, who came tottering after on his gold-headed stick.

'Never mind Rosie, for once. If they ask you, do not refuse, pray,' whispered Mr. Rivers. He seemed either excessively fond of, or painfully subservient to, his family—a family which appeared to Hannah very much like most other county families—well looking, well bred, well educated, and exceedingly well dressed. Among the odd fancies that flitted across her mind—she had had a keen sense of humour, and even a slight turn for satire, in her youth—was the comical suggestion—What would they be without their clothes? That is, how would they look or feel if dressed like workhouse-women or labourers' wives—or, still worse, in the red chemise of Charlotte Corday or the white sheet of Jane Shore? They looked so very proper—those five ladies, sweeping one after the other down the church aisle, and kneeling, not a fold awry in their draperies, round their respectable square pew—that, to imagine them placed

in tragical or anywise exceptional circumstances, where the trappings of worldly formality had dropped off them, and they had to feel and act like common creatures of flesh and blood, seemed a thing impossible.

Foolish thoughts these were, perhaps; but they were partly owing to her brother-in-law's sermon, which was exceedingly commonplace. He had said himself, overnight, that he felt not the slightest interest in his sermons, and only did them mechanically, not believing them at all. It looked like it; and as Miss Thelluson listened—or rather tried hard not to listen, for it irritated her so—she wished that instead of being in church she were sitting on the sunny lawn, beside that little white daisy with a pink hood, which, as she kissed it before leaving, had looked up to her with eyes in which were written the best sermons in the world—eyes that seemed as if only an hour ago they had seen the angels.

As Hannah thought of them, she forgot Lady Rivers, with her withered, but still red—ah! far too red—cheeks, and the Misses Rivers, with their fashionable clothes. What were they to her? Had she not her baby—her little Rose of June? The dainty, soft, round, innocent thing! how sweet she must be looking now in her midday sleep at home!—It was the first time that even in thought Miss Thelluson had called her brother-in-law's house 'home.' She did so now, for her baby was there.

Her baby, and no one else's; for no one seemed to take the smallest interest in it. After service, the procession of five silk gowns, with women inside them, sailed slowly back down the yew avenue, and through the garden to the beautiful old Moat-House: but nobody asked after baby. Neither grandmamma nor aunts seemed to remember there was such a creature in the world. Hannah hugged herself half indigantly, half exultingly, in the fact. Her baby was all her own.

The Rivers family was perfectly polite to her. The invitation to lunch was given, and—chiefly because of the anxiety she saw in her brother-in-law's eyes—accepted; so they sat down all together in the grand old dining-room, with generations of defunct Riverses watching them from the walls. The conversation was quite general, and rather insipid; indeed, Hannah could not help thinking how very dull was the company of grown-up people after that of her baby. Her baby! whose dumb intelligence was such an infinite mystery, such an endless interest. She longed to be back at home with Rosie; nevertheless she did her best, for Mr. Rivers's sake, to be pleasant, and when—he having a christening and a funeral, though there was no second service—he asked her to wait for him, that they might walk home together, she sat down again to endure another hour of the foolish heart-ache which mothers understand, when they are kept away for a good many hours from the helpless creature that depends on them so entirely.

The bright day had settled into autumnal rain, so the family party gathered round the fire—doing nothing, of course, as it was Sunday. Sir Austin openly fell asleep; Lady Rivers took up a huge Bible and 'meditated'—nodding a good deal at intervals; the girls began, *sotto voce*, that desultory gossiping which is supposed to be so much more Sabbatical than books or work. They were all pretty girls—nay, rather pleasant girls, these four paternal aunts of little Rosie; and her maternal aunt tried hard to get acquainted with them, and find out what was really in them. But, of late years, Hannah's life had been so much spent with children, and so little with young ladies, that she found herself completely at sea, and watching these specimens of modern womanhood with the grave, perplexed criticism of an elder generation.

'Will my Rosie grow up thus?' she thought to herself. 'Will she talk about "jolly," and "green,"

and "the maternal parent," and "the governor?" Will there come into her little innocent head such very odd ideas about love and marriage? (One of the girls was engaged, and the others evidently hoped to be so, ere long.) 'Is she to grow up a little Miss Rivers, after the pattern of these?'

Not if auntie can help it, answered auntie's quiet, strong heart, as the awfulness of her self-imposed duty, extending far into future years, came upon her with double force. A boy would have belonged to his father, and been made naturally and wholly a Rivers, but a girl—this little unwelcome girl—was hers and Rosa's. Might not baby grow up to be the foundress of a new family, the mother of many sons? This childless old maid, whose race was done, built up no end of castles in the air for her niece Rosie. In which, I am afraid—and yet in time to come Miss Thelluson was not sorry, but glad of this—Rosie's father had not the slightest share.

She fell into such a dream about the child—even in the midst of the young ladies' chatter—that she quite started when Lady Rivers, suddenly waking up, and most anxious to appear as if she had never been sleeping, put a sudden question.

'By-the-by, Miss Thelluson, I hear you have discharged Anne Savage, and taken a new nursery-maid?'

'Mrs. Savage gave me warning herself, but I was not sorry, as I prefer a younger woman,' said Hannah quietly.

'That, pardon me, is a mistake. I always made a point that my head-nurse should be over forty.'

'But you had a nursery full of children; I have only Rosie.'

'Oh, by-the-by, how is Rosie?' cried one of the girls. But as she did not wait for an answer, Hannah never gave it.

'And who is your new nurse?' said grandmamma, in a rather severe grandmotherly tone.

‘Grace Dixon, sister, I believe, to those Dixons of whom the village is so full. It was Mrs. John Dixon, the blacksmith’s wife, who recommended her to me. She said you knew the family well.’

‘Miss Thelluson seems to have acquainted herself with Easterham people as if she had lived here all her days,—or meant to do so,’ said the eldest Miss Rivers, who was at times a little sharp of speech. She was nearly twenty-eight, and still Miss Rivers, which she did not like at all.

‘No, I do not mean to live at Easterham all my days,’ returned Hannah, glad of an opportunity to remove any false impression the family might have of her coming to take entire possession of her brother-in-law, and rule rampant over him all the rest of his life, as evidently they thought he might be ruled. ‘On the contrary, I earnestly hope my stay here will be short; that your brother may soon find a good wife, and need me no more.’

‘So you approve of second marriages?’

‘Yes,’ said Hannah, swallowing down a slight pang. ‘Yes. In a case like this, most decidedly. I think the wisest thing Mr. Rivers could do would be to marry again, after due time. That is, if he married the right woman.’

‘What do you mean by the “right woman?”’ asked Lady Rivers.

‘One who will make a good mother as well as a good wife. In his first choice a man has only to think of himself, in a second marriage he has usually to consider not only himself, but his children.’

‘I don’t fancy Bernard will be in any haste to marry again. He was very, very fond of poor Rosa.’

It was Adeline, the youngest, who said this; and Hannah’s heart warmed to her—the first who had called her dead sister ‘Rosa,’ or, indeed, spoken of her at all. To Adeline she turned for information about the Dixon family, and especially about the girl



Grace, whom she had taken chiefly upon instinct, because she had a kind, sweet, good face—a sad face, too, as if she had known trouble; and had, indeed, begged for the place, because ‘her heart was breaking for want of a child to look after.’

‘What an odd thing to say! Well, my heart wouldn’t break for that, at any rate,’ laughed Adeline. ‘But really I can tell you nothing about the poor people of Easterham. We have no time to go about as your sister did. Bernard ought to know. Here he comes.’

Hannah looked up, almost glad to see Mr. Rivers return. His society was not lively, but it was less dull than that of his sisters. Just to keep conversation going—for it had reached a very low ebb—she explained to him the matter under discussion, but he seemed to have forgotten all about it.

‘If you remember, I brought the girl into your study, and you liked her appearance, and said I might engage her at once.’

‘Did I? then of course it is all right. Why talk it over any more? I assure you, girls, one of Miss Thelluson’s great merits is that she does not talk things over. As I always tell her, she can act for herself, and never need consult me on anything.’

‘But you ought to be consulted,’ broke in Lady Rivers, ‘and in this matter especially. My dear Bernard, are you aware that, in your position, you ought to be very cautious? Miss Thelluson—a stranger—is of course ignorant of certain facts; otherwise Grace Dixon is the very last person she ought to bring into your household.’

‘Why so? The Dixons are an excellent family; have lived at Easterham Farm half as long as the Rivers have lived at the Moat-House.’

‘It is the more pity,’ said Lady Rivers, drawing herself up. ‘My dear Bernard, you have surely forgotten; and the subject is a little awkward to speak of before Miss Thelluson and the girls.’

Hannah sat silent, expecting one of those sad stories only too common in all villages. And yet Grace Dixon looked so sad—so innocent, and her kindly and very respectable sisters had not seemed in the least ashamed of her.

‘I cannot guess what you mean, Lady Rivers,’ said Bernard irritably. ‘I know nothing against the Dixons. The daughters were all well conducted, and the sons——’

‘It was one of the sons. But perhaps I had better not mention it.’

The good lady had a habit of ‘not mentioning’ facts, which, nevertheless, she allowed to leak out patiently enough; and another habit of saying, in the sweetest way, the most unpleasant things. Her stepson had winced under them more than once to-day; as, Hannah noticed, he did now. Still he replied, with perfect politeness—

‘I think you had better mention it. It cannot be anything very bad, or I should have remembered it. Though I do forget things often—often,’ added he, relapsing into his usual dreary manner.

‘If you will rouse yourself, you surely will remember this, and the discussion there was about it one evening here: a discussion in which your wife took part, and gave her opinion, though it was an opinion contrary to your own, and mine.’

Bernard’s countenance changed, as it did at the slightest mention of his lost darling. ‘Yes; I recall the matter now,’ he said, and stopped suddenly.

But Lady Rivers went on triumphant. ‘The scandal, Miss Thelluson, though I must apologise for referring to it before you, was just this. One of the brothers Dixon lost his wife, and six months after wanted to marry her sister, who had been keeping his house. He actually came to Mr. Rivers, as her clergyman, and asked him to marry them. A mar-

riage, you understand, within the forbidden degrees—between a man and his deceased wife's sister.'

She looked hard at Hannah, as if expecting her to be confused; but she was not: no more than when Lady Dunsmore had referred, though in a much more direct way, to the same subject. It was one so entirely removed from herself and her own personality, that she felt no more affected by it than she should have been if in Lord Dunsmore's drawing-room she had heard some one telling a story of how a father eloped with his children's governess. Of course such things were, but they did not concern her in the least.

Her entire innocence and composure seemed to shame even Lady Rivers; to Mr. Rivers, though at first he had coloured sensitively, they gave self-possession at once.

'Yes,' he said, 'I remember the whole story now. Dixon did come and ask me to marry him to his sister-in-law, which of course I refused, as it was against both the canon law and the law of the land.'

'And the law of God also,' said Lady Rivers sharply.

'That I did not argue; it was no business of mine. I was rather sorry for the man—he seemed to have no ill intent; but the marriage was impossible. However this does not concern the rest of the Dixon family or the new nursemaid. What about her?'

But as often as he tried to slide away from the unpleasant topic his step-mother pertinaciously slid back again.

'Excuse me; I think it does concern the rest of the family. No one can touch pitch without being defiled, and a scandal like this affects every one connected with it. How did it end, Bernard?'

'I cannot tell. Probably Dixon went to some other and less scrupulous clergyman, or some distant

parish, where they could put up banns and be married without being known; or else he went back and they lived together without being married at all. Such cases happen continually. But why speak of them? Is it necessary to speak of unpleasant things?’

Yet the way he himself spoke of them, with a mixture of directness and grave simplicity, as only a pure-hearted man ever does speak, struck Hannah much. Also his quiet way of getting over an extremely awkward position, which to avoid would have been more awkward still. But Lady Rivers would not let him alone.

‘And I suppose you think now, as I remember Mrs. Bernard did at the time, that you were wrong in refusing to marry the man?’

‘No; I was right. I have been similarly applied to many times since, for the poor have strangely confused notions on this point, and I have always refused. The law makes these people brothers and sisters, therefore they cannot possibly be married. But, my dear Lady Rivers, let us leave a topic which really does not concern us. The matter of moment now, Aunt Hannah,’ turning towards her with the smile of a worried man who knows that there at least he shall find rest, ‘is that you and I must leave this warm fireside and walk home through the wet together; unless, indeed, we make up our minds to swim.’

The perfect freedom, and yet friendly respect of his manner, healed over all the discourtesies which Lady Rivers had so remorselessly inflicted. Miss Thelluson rose, thankfully enough, and they two started off in the pelting rain, for nobody ever thought of ordering the Moat-House carriage on a Sunday. Besides, Hannah never minded weather, and the storm seemed almost to do her brother-in-law good. Like all really manly men, he was roused and cheered by the necessity of fighting against something; perhaps, also, of protecting something. He wrapped his sister-

in-law well up, and sustained her steps carefully against the wild equinoctial blast, which was almost like pressing against a stone wall.

After they quitted the Moat-House, Mr. Rivers never referred to the matter which had been so obstinately and unpleasantly discussed in their presence. He seemed at once to accept it and ignore it, as those should whom fate has placed in any anomalous or difficult position that lays them open to many annoyances; which must, nevertheless, be borne, and are best borne with complete indifference. Hannah took her lesson from him; not without a certain respect, deeper than she had yet felt—and did the same.

They parted in the hall, he to go into his study, she to run eagerly up-stairs, drawn thither by the little merry voice which was heard through the nursery-door chattering its utterly unintelligible English. Hannah's face brightened into something almost like beauty at the sound. Rosa's father stopped to say—

‘You are getting very fond of my child!’

‘It would be strange if I were not. Is she not my niece—my own flesh and blood? And, besides, I don't think there ever was such a child!’ cried foolish Aunt Hannah. ‘Just look there!’

The little round rosy face—it was rosy now, having grown so already in the pleasant new nursery, and under incessant loving care—was looking through the balustrades, making a vain effort to say ‘Peep!’ at least so Rosie's imaginative female worshippers declared it to be. Behind appeared Grace Dixon's pale, kind, sweet looks, moved almost into cheerfulness by the brightness of baby's. A pretty sight, and for the first time it seemed to bring a ray of sunshine into the widower's household. He sighed, but his sigh was less forlorn.

‘How happy the child looks! Poor Rosie, she is not in the least like her mother—except in that sunshiny nature of hers. I hope she may keep it always.’

‘I hope so too, and I believe she will. I did not think her pretty at first; but never—never was there such a touching child.’

‘It is your doing, then.’

‘And Grace’s, too. She has been quite different even these few days since Grace had her. I hope’—and here Hannah could not help colouring a little—‘you will not require me to send away Grace?’

‘No.’ Mr. Rivers paused a minute, and then said gravely: ‘I am sorry that anything should have vexed you to-day. Do not mind grandmamma; she speaks thoughtlessly sometimes; but she means no harm. She likes interfering now and then; but you can bear that, I know. Remember, I will always uphold you in matters concerning Rosie or the household, or anything else that you think right.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Hannah warmly. She shook cordially the hand he gave, and ran up-stairs ‘to Auntie’s darling’ with a light heart.

## CHAPTER IV.

It is a mistake to take for granted, as in books and life we perpetually do, that people must always remain the same. On the contrary, most people are constantly changing—growing, let us hope, but still changing—in character, feelings, opinions. If we took this into account we should often be less harsh to judge: less piteously misjudged ourselves. For instance, we resolve always to love our friend and hate our enemy; but our friend may prove false, and our enemy kind and good. What are we then to do? To go on loving and hating as before? I fear we cannot. We must accept things as they stand, and act accordingly. Or—and this is a common case—

we may ourselves once have had certain faults, which we afterwards had sense to see and correct; yet those who knew us in our faulty days will never believe this, and go on condemning us for ever—which is a little hard. And again, we may have started honestly on a certain course, and declared openly certain opinions or intentions, which we afterwards see cause to modify, or even to renounce entirely. Time and circumstance have so altered us that we are obliged to give our old selves the lie direct, or else to be untrue to our present selves. In short, we must just retract, in act and word, boldly or weakly, nobly or ignobly, as our natures allow. And though we have been perfectly sincere throughout, the chances are that no one will believe us: we shall be stamped as hypocrites, renegades, or deep designing schemers, to the end of our days. This, too, is hard; and it takes a strong heart and a clear conscience to bear it.

When Hannah Thelluson consented to come to her brother-in-law's house, and he thankfully opened to her its dreary doors, they were two most sorrowful people, who yet meant to make the best of their sorrow, and of one another, so as to be a mutual comfort, if possible. At least this was her intent; he probably had no intent at all beyond the mere relief of the moment. Men—and young men—seldom look ahead, as women do.

Now, two people living under the same roof, and greatly dependent upon one another, seldom remain long in a state of indifference; they take either to loving or hating; and these two, being both of them good people, though so very different in character, were not likely to do the latter. Besides, they stood in that relation which of all others most attracts regard, of reciprocally doing good and being done good to. They shared one another's burdens, and gave one another help. Consequently the burdens

lightened, and the help increased, every day that they resided together.

Their life was very equable, quiet, and, at first, rather dull. Of course, the widower did not visit, or receive visitors. Occasional family dinners at the Moat-House, and a few morning calls, received and paid, were all that Hannah saw of Easterham society. She had the large handsome house entirely to herself, often from morning to night; for gradually Mr. Rivers went back to his parish duties, which he once used most creditably to fulfil. Consequently, instead of hanging about the house all day, he was frequently absent till dinner-time. This was a great source of satisfaction to Miss Thelluson; at first—let the honest truth be told—because she was heartily glad to get rid of him; by-and-by from sincere pleasure at the good it did him.

‘Work always comforts a man,’ she said to herself, when she saw him come in, fresh from battling with rain and wind, or eager to secure her help and sympathy in some case of distress in the parish, his handsome face looking ten years younger, and his listless manner gaining energy and decision.

‘You were right, Aunt Hannah,’ he would often say, with an earnest thoughtfulness, that was yet not exactly sadness. ‘To preach to sufferers one needs to have suffered oneself. I shall be a better parson now than I used to be, I hope. On week-days certainly, and perhaps even on Sundays, if you will continue to look over my sermons.’

Which, people began to say, were much better than they used to be, and Hannah herself thought so too. She always read them, and, after a while, criticised them, pretty sharply and fearlessly, every Saturday night. On other nights she got her brother-in-law into the habit of reading aloud; first, because it was much the easiest way of passing the evening,—and after being out all day he absolutely refused to



go out again, lessening even his visits to the Moat-House whenever he could;—secondly, because soon she came to like it very much. It was like falling into a dream of peace, to sit sewing at Rosie's little clothes (for Aunt Hannah did all she could for her darling with her own hands), silent—she always loved silence—yet listening to Mr. Rivers's pleasant voice, and thinking over, quietly to herself, what he was reading. In this way, during the first three months, they got through a quantity of books, both of prose and poetry, and had grown familiar enough now and then to lay the books down, and take to arguments: quarrelling fiercely at times, until either became accustomed to the other's way of thinking, and avoided warlike topics, or fought so honourably and well, that the battle ended in mutual respect, and very often in a fit of mutual laughter.

It may be a dreadful thing to confess, but they did laugh sometimes. Ay, even with the moonlight sleeping, or the white snow falling, on Rosa's grave a mile off—Rosa who was with the angels smiling in the eternal smile of God. These others, left behind to do their earthly work, were not always miserable. Rosie began the change, by growing every day more charming, more interesting, more curious, in her funny little ways, every one of which aunt retailed to papa when he came home, as if there had never been such a wonderful baby in any house before.

A baby in the house. Does anybody fully know what that is till he—no, she—has tried it?

Hannah did not. Fond as she was of children, and well accustomed to them, they were all other people's children. This one was her own. On her alone depended the little human soul and human body for everything in life—everything that could make it grow up, to itself and the world, a blessing or a curse. A solemn way of viewing things, per-

haps; but Hannah was a solemn-minded woman. She erred, anyhow, on the right side. This was the 'duty' half of her new existence; the other half was joy—wholly joy.

A child in the house. Say rather an angel; for, I think, Heaven leaves a touch of the angel in all little children, to reward those about them for their inevitable cares. Rosie was, to other people besides her aunt, a very remarkable child—wonderfully sweet, and yet brave even as a baby. She never cried for pain or fretfulness, though she sometimes did for passion, and for sorrow—a strange, contrite, grown-up kind of sorrow—whenever she did anything the least wrong, which was very seldom. She was usually a perfect sunbeam of brightness, wholesomeness, and content. Her delicacy and fragility, which were only that of a flower reared up in darkness, and recovering its healthy colours as soon as ever it is brought into the sun, soon became among the things that had been. Not a child in all Easterham seemed more likely to thrive than Rosie Rivers; and everybody, even at the Moat-House, now acknowledged this, to Miss Thelluson's great glory and delight. Grace's also—unto whom much credit was owing.

Hannah had taken her rather rashly, perhaps—wise people sometimes do, upon instinct, rather rash things. She thought so herself when one day, accidentally asking Grace some apparently trivial question, the girl burst into tears, confessed that she was a married woman, and her husband had run away from her. 'But I was married, indeed I was, and his sisters know it!' Which the sisters, who were in fact sisters-in-law, resolutely confirmed; but no more facts could be gained. Nor did Hannah like to inquire, having a feeling that poor women's miseries were as sacred as rich ones. It was an unwelcome discovery—a nurse with a living and, probably, scape-grace husband might prove very inconvenient; still,

she had grown fond of the girl, who was passionately devoted to Rosie.

‘For Rosie’s sake I must keep her, if possible; and for her own sake, poor thing, I cannot bear to send her away. What must I do?’

Rosie’s father, to whom she thus appealed—for, despite what he had said, she persistently consulted him in everything—answered decisively, ‘Let her stay.’ So Grace stayed. But Miss Thelluson insisted that she should no longer pass under false colours, but be called Mrs. Dixon; and, finding she had no wedding-ring—her husband, she declared, had torn it from her finger the day he left her—Hannah took the trouble to buy her a new one, and insisted upon her wearing it, saying ‘she hated all deccits of every kind.’ Upon which Grace looked up to her with such grateful, innocent eyes, that, Quixotic as her conduct might appear to some people—it did at the Moat-House, where the girls laughed at her immoderately—she felt sure the story was true, and that she should never repent having thus acted.

This was the only incident of the Winter, and as week after week passed by, and nothing ill came of it, no runaway husband ever appeared, and poor Grace brightened into the tenderest nurse, the most faithful servant, hardly thinking she could do enough for her mistress and the child, Hannah ceased to think of it, or of anything unpleasant, so busy and contented was she.

More than content—that she had always been—actually happy. True, she had thought her May-time wholly past; but now, as Spring began to waken, as she and Rosie began to gather primroses in the garden and daisies in the lanes, it seemed to her as if her youth had come back again. Youth, fresh and full, added to all the experience, the satisfied enjoyment, of middle age. They were like two babies together, she and Rosie, all through this, Rosie’s first earthly

spring. They crawled together on the sunny grass-plot; they played bo-peep round the oak-tree; they investigated with the deepest interest every new green leaf, and flower, and insect; for she tried to make her child like the child in the 'Story without an End'—a companion and friend to all living things. And Rosie, by the time she was eighteen months old, with her sweetness, intelligence, and the mysterious way the baby-soul opened out to the wonders and beauty of this our world, had taught her Aunt Hannah quite as much as Aunt Hannah had taught her, and become even a greater blessing than the blessings she received.

'It is all the child's doing,' Hannah said, laughing and blushing, one day, when Mr. Rivers came suddenly in, and found her dancing through the hall with Rosie in her arms, and singing too, at the top of her voice. 'She is the sunbeam of the house. Every servant in it spoils her, and serves her like a little queen. As for me, auntie makes a goose of herself every hour in the day. Doesn't she, Rosie? At her time of life, too!'

'What is your time of life? for I really don't know,' said Mr. Rivers, smiling. 'Sometimes you look quite young, and then, again, I fancy you must be fully as old as I am.'

'Older. Thirty-one.'

'Well, I am thirty; so when you die of old age I shall begin to quake. But tell her not to die, Rosie.' And a sad look came across his face, as it still often did. Hannah knew what it meant. 'Bid her live and take care of us both. What in the wide world should we two do without Aunt Hannah?'

And Rosie, with that chance instinct of babyhood, often so touching, patted with her tiny soft hand her aunt's cheek, saying, wooingly, 'Nice Tannie, pitty Tannie,'—which had been her first wild attempt at 'Aunt Hannah!'

'Tannie,'—the name clung to her already, as baby pet-names always do—pressed the little breast to hers in a passion of delight and content, knowing that there was not a creature in the world—no woman certainly—to come between her and her child. *Her* child! Twenty mothers, she sometimes thought,

'Could not with all their quantity of love  
Make up the sum'

of that she felt for her motherless darling.

The father stood and watched them both. As Rosie grew older and more winning, he began to take more notice of his little girl, at least when Aunt Hannah was present to mount guard over her, and keep her good and quiet.

'You look quite a picture, you two, Hannah!' (he sometimes called her 'Hannah' without the 'Aunt.') 'You must be excessively fond of that child?'

She laughed; a low, soft, happy laugh. Her feeling for little Rosie was a thing she could not talk about. Besides, its sacredness had a double root, as it were; and one root was in the dead mother's grave.

'The little thing seems very fond of you too, as well she may be,' continued Mr. Rivers. 'I trust she may yet repay you for all your love. I hope—I earnestly hope—that you and she may never be parted.'

A natural thought accidentally expressed. Hannah said to herself over and over again, that it must have been purely accidental, and meant nothing; yet it shot through her like a bolt of ice. Was there a chance, the dimmest, remotest chance, that she and the child might be parted? Did he, now that the twelvemonth of mourning had expired, contemplate marrying again,—as Lady Dunsmore had foretold he

would? Indeed, in a letter lately—for she still wrote sometimes, and would by no means lose sight of her former governess—the countess had put the direct question, at which Miss Thelluson had only smiled.

Now, she did not smile. She felt actually uneasy. She ran rapidly over, in her mind, all the young ladies he had seen or mentioned lately—very few; and he seemed to have no interest in any. Still there might be some one whom she had never heard of: and if so, if he married again, would he require her—of course he would!—to quit the House on the Hill, and leave behind his little daughter?

‘I could not! No! I will not,’ thought she. And after the one cold shiver came a hot thrill of something more like fierceness than her quiet nature had known for long. ‘To expect me to give up my child. It would be cruel, barbarous!’ And then came a sudden, frantic idea of snatching up Rosie in her arms and running away with her, anyhow, anywhere, so as to hide her from her father. ‘I shall do it—I know I shall! if he drives me to it. He had better not try!’

And hot tears dropped on the little white nightgown which Aunt Hannah was vainly endeavouring to tie. It was Sunday night; and she always sent Grace to church and put the child to bed herself of Sundays. Bitter, miserable tears they were too, but only on account of the child. Nothing more. Afterwards, when she recalled them, and what had produced them, this first uneasy fear which had shot across the calm heaven of her life,—a heavenly life it had grown to be since she had the child,—Hannah felt certain that she could have looked the child’s angel, or its mother, in the face, and declared positively they were nothing more.

But the notion of having to part from Rosie, under the only circumstances in which that parting was natural and probable, having once entered her mind,

lurked there uneasily, troubling often the happy hours she spent with her darling; for the aunt, wholly engrossed with her charge, had her with her more than most mothers, with whom their children's father holds rightly the first place. Nevertheless, Miss Thelluson did her duty most satisfactorily by her brother-in-law. Whenever papa wanted auntie, little Rosie was remorselessly sent away, even though auntie's heart followed her longingly all the while. But she had already learnt her lesson—she never allowed the child to be a trouble to the father.

‘Not one man in a thousand cares to be troubled about anything, you may depend upon that,’ she said one day gaily to the second Miss Rivers, who was about to be married.

‘Who taught you that? my brother? Well, you must have had plenty of experience of him, faults and all; almost as much as his wife had,’ said the sister sarcastically, which made Hannah rather sorry that she had unwittingly betrayed the results of her year's experience at the House on the Hill.

Yes; she knew her brother-in-law pretty well by this time—all his weaknesses, all his virtues; better, he told her, and she believed it, than his own sisters knew him. He was so unlike them in character, tastes, and feelings, that she had now ceased to wonder why he chose none of them to live with him and Rosie, but preferred rather his wife's sister, who might a little resemble his wife, as Hannah sometimes vaguely wished she did.

More especially when the approaching marriage forced him out of his retirement, and he had to officiate in the festivities as eldest brother, instead of poor Austin, whom nobody ever saw or spoke of. Bernard had to act as head of the house, Sir Austin being very frail now; and he accepted his place and went through his duties with a cheerfulness that Hannah was surprised yet glad to see. If only he could have

had beside him the bright, beautiful wife who was gone, instead of a grave sister like herself! Still, she did her best; went out with him when he asked her, and at other times stayed quietly at home—half amused, half troubled to find how she, who in the first months of Winter almost longed for solitude, now began to find it just a little dull. She was not so glad of her own company as she used to be, and found the evenings, after Rosie's bed-time, rather long. Only the evenings: of mornings, when Rosie was with her, she felt no want of any kind.

Following the wedding—to which Miss Thelluson was of course asked, and, somewhat unwillingly, went, seeing Mr. Rivers wished it—came many bridal parties, to which she was invited too. Thence ensued a small difficulty—ridiculous in itself, and yet involving much—which, when her brother-in-law urged her to accompany him everywhere, she was at last obliged to confess.

‘I can't go,’ she said laughing—it was much better to make it a jesting than a serious matter. ‘The real truth is, I've got no clothes.’

And then came out another truth, which Mr. Rivers, with his easy fortunes and masculine indifference to money, had never suspected, and was most horrified at—that, her salary as governess ceasing, Aunt Hannah had absolutely nothing to live upon. Though dwelling in the midst of luxury, and spending unlimited sums upon housekeeping weekly, the utmost she had had to spend upon herself, since she came to the House on the Hill, was an innocent fifteen-pound note, laid by from last year, the remains of which went in the wedding-gown of quiet grey silk which had replaced her well-worn black one.

‘Dreadful!’ cried Mr. Rivers. ‘While you have been doing everything for me, I have left you like a pauper!’

‘Not exactly,’ and she laughed again at his ve-



hement contrition. 'Indeed, I had as much money as I wanted, for my wants are small. Remember, I have been for so many years a poor governess.'

'You shall never be poor again, nor a governess neither. I cannot tell you how much I owe you—how deeply I respect you. What can I say? Rather, what can I do?' He thought a little, and then said, 'The only plan is, you must let me do for you exactly what I would have done for my own sister. Listen, while I explain.'

He then proposed to pay her a quarterly allowance, or annuity, large enough to make her quite independent personally. Or, if she preferred it, to make over the principal, in a deed of gift, from which she could draw the same sum, as interest, at her pleasure.

'And, you understand, this is quite between ourselves. My fortune is my own, independent of my family. No one but we two need ever be the wiser. Only say the word, and the matter shall be settled at once.'

Tears sprang to Hannah's eyes.

'You are a good, kind brother to me,' she said. 'Nor would it matter so very much, as if I did take the money I should just make a will and leave it back to Rosie. But I cannot take it. I never yet was indebted to any man alive.'

'It would not be indebtedness, only justice,' argued he. 'You are a practical woman, let me put it in a practical light. I am not giving, only paying—as I should have to pay some other lady. Why should I be more just and liberal to a stranger than to you? This on my side. On yours—What can you do? You are fed and housed, but you must be clothed. You are not a lily of the field. Though'—looking at her as she stood beside him, tall, and slender, and pale—'I sometimes think there is a good deal of the lily about you, Aunt Hannah. You are so single-

mind and pure-hearted—and, like the lilies, you preach me a silent lesson many a time.’

‘Not always silent,’ said she, yet was pleased at the compliment. He had never made her a pretty speech before. Then, too, his urging her to remain with him, on the only possible terms on which she could remain—those he proposed—proved that he was not contemplating marriage—at least, not immediately.

All he said was thoroughly kind, generous, and wise. Besides her sound common-sense told her that clothes did not grow upon bushes, and that if she were to continue as mistress of the House on the Hill, it was essential that Rosie’s aunt and Mr. Rivers’s sister-in-law should not go dressed, as he indignantly put it, ‘like a pauper.’ She considered a little, and then, putting her pride in her pocket, she accepted the position of matters as inevitable.

‘Very well, Mr. Rivers. Give me the same salary that I received from Earl Dunsmore, and I will take it from you as I did from him. It will cover all my personal needs, and even allow me, as heretofore, to put by a little for my old age.’

‘Your old age? Where should that be spent but here—in my house?’

‘Your house may not always be ——’ She stopped: she had not the heart to put into plain words the plain fact that he might marry again—few men were more likely to do so. But he seemed to understand it.

‘Oh, Hannah!’ he said, and turned away. She was so vexed at herself that she dropped the conversation at once.

Next day Miss Thelluson found on her toilet-table, in a blank envelope, a cheque for a hundred pounds.

At first she felt a strong inclination to throw the money into the fire—then a kind of sensation of gratitude.

‘If I had not liked him, I couldn’t have touched

a halfpenny; but I do like him. So I must take it, and try to please him as much as I can.'

For that reason, and to do him credit when she went out with him, poor Hannah expended more money and thought over her clothes than she had done for years, appearing in toilets so good and tasteful, though simple still, that the Moat-House girls wondered what in the world had come over her to make her look so young.

We are always changing within and without, modified more or less, as was said in the beginning of this chapter, by continually changing circumstances. Had any one a year ago shown Hannah her picture, as she often appeared now, in pretty evening dress—she had lovely round arms still, and it was Rosie's delight to catch them bare, and fondle and hug them to her little bosom as 'dollies'—Hannah would have said such a woman was not herself at all. Yet it was; and hers, too, was the heart, wonderfully gay and light sometimes, which she carried about through the day, and lay down to sleep with at night, marvelling what she had done that Heaven should make her life thus content and glad.

The change was so gradual, that she accepted it almost without recognition. Ay, even when there came an event which six months ago she would have trembled at—the first dinner-party at the House on the Hill, given in honour of the bride.

'I must give it, I suppose,' said Mr. Rivers. 'You will not mind? I hope it will not trouble you very much?'

'Oh, no.'

'Be it so then.' He walked off, and then came back, saying a little awkwardly, 'Of course, you understand that you keep your usual place as mistress here.'

'Certainly, if you wish it.'

So she sat at the head of his table, and did all the

honours as lady of the house. At which some other ladies, country people from a distance—for it was a state dinner-party—looked—just a little surprised. One especially, a malign-looking old dowager, with two or three unmarried daughters, whispered—

‘His sister-in-law, did you tell me? I thought she was quite a middle-aged person. Better, perhaps, if she had been. And they live here together—quite alone, you say? Dear me!’

The words were inaudible to Miss Thelluson, but she caught the look, and during the evening several other looks of the same inquisitorial kind. They made her feel—she hardly knew why—rather uncomfortable. Otherwise, she would have enjoyed the evening considerably. No woman is indifferent to the pleasure of being mistress of an elegant, well-ordered house, where her servants like her and obey her—she doing her duty and they theirs, so that all things go smoothly and well, as they did now. Also she liked to please Mr. Rivers, who was much easier to please than formerly. His old sweet temper, that poor Rosa used so fondly to dilate on, had returned; and oh! what a rare blessing is a sweet temper in a house, especially in the head of it! Then, by this time, his sister-in-law understood his ways, had grown used to his very weaknesses, and found they were not so bad, after all. He was far from being her ideal, certainly; but who are they who ever find their ideal? And Hannah sighed, remembering her own—the loveliest and most loveable nature she had ever met, or so it had appeared to her in her girlhood’s long-ended dream. But God had taken Arthur home; and thinking of him now, it was more as an angel than as a mortal man.

Looking round on the men she saw now—and they had been a good many lately—she found no one equal to Bernard Rivers. As he took his place again in society, a young widower who had passed from under the blackest shadow of his loss, though it had left in

him an abiding gravity, he would have been counted in all circles an attractive person. Handsome, yet not obnoxiously so; clever—though perhaps more in an appreciative than an original fashion; pleasant in conversation, yet never putting himself obtrusively forward, he was a man that most men liked, and all women were sure to admire amazingly. Hannah saw—she could not help seeing—how daughters brightened as he came near, and mothers were extraordinarily tender to him; and, in fact, had he perceived this—which he did not seem to do, being very free from self-consciousness—Bernard Rivers would have run a very good chance of being thoroughly ‘spoiled.’

He was not yet spoiled, however; it was charming to watch him, and see how innocently he took all this social flattery, which Hannah noticed with considerable amusement, and a sort of affectionate pleasure at thinking that, however agreeable he was abroad, he was still more so at home, in those quiet evenings, now sadly diminished. She wondered sometimes how long they would last, how soon her brother-in-law would weary of her companionship, and seek nearer and fonder ties. Well, that must be left to fate; it was useless speculating. So she did her best now; and when several times, during dinner, he glanced across the table to her and smiled, and also came more than once through the drawing-rooms to look for her, and say a kindly word or two, Hannah was a satisfied and happy woman.

Only—during the pause of a long piece of concerted music by the three remaining Misses Rivers—fancying she heard Rosie cry, she crept away up-stairs, and finding her sitting up in her crib, sobbing from a bad dream, Aunt Hannah caught her child to her bosom more passionately than usual. And when the little thing clung for refuge to her, and was soothed to sleep again under showers of kisses, Hannah thought rejoicingly that there was one creature in the world to whom she was absolutely necessary, and all in all.

His guests being at length gone, the host stood on his hearth-rug, meditative, even grave.

‘Well, Hannah!’ he said at last.

She looked up.

‘So our dinner-party is safe over. It went off beautifully, I must say!’

‘Yes; I think it did.’

‘And I am so much obliged to you for all the trouble you must have taken. I do like to have things nice and in order—every man does. Especially as Lady Rivers was there. They think so much of these matters at the Moat-House.’

Hannah, half pleased, half vexed, she scarce knew why, answered nothing.

‘Yes, it was very pleasant, and the people were pleasant too. But yet I think I like our quiet evenings best.’

‘So do I,’ Hannah was going to say, and then hesitated, with a curious kind of shyness, for she had been thinking the very same. Wondering also, how long this gay life they now led was to go on, and whether it would end in that climax for which she was always preparing herself—Bernard Rivers taking a second wife, and saying to his sister-in-law, ‘Thank you; I want you no more. Good-bye!’ A perfectly right, natural, and desirable thing too, her reason told her. And yet—and yet—Well! she would, at least, not meet difficulties half-way, but would enjoy her halcyon days while they lasted.

So she sat down with him on the chair he placed for her, one on either side the fire, and proceeded to talk over the dinner and the guests, with other small familiar topics, which people naturally fall into discussing when they are perfectly at home with each other, and have one common interest running through their lives. All their associations now had the easy freedom of the fraternal relation, mingled with a certain vague sentiment, such as people feel who are not really

brother and sister; but, having spent all their prior lives apart, require to get over a sort of pleasant strangeness, which has all the charm of travelling in a new country.

In the midst of it, when they were laughing together over some wonderful infantine jest of little Rosie's, there came a knock to the door and a face looked stealthily in.

Hannah sprang up in terror. 'O Grace! What is it? Anything wrong with baby?'

'No, miss, nothing. How wrong of me to frighten you so!' cried the young woman contritely, as Miss Thelluson dropped back in her chair, so pale that Mr. Rivers hastily brought her a glass of wine, and spoke sharply to the nurse.

Grace looked at him with a scared face. 'It's true, sir; I hardly know what I'm saying or doing. But never mind! The little one is all right; it's only my own trouble. And I've kept it to myself all day long because I wouldn't trouble her when she was busy over her dinner-party. But, O miss! will you speak to me now, for my heart's breaking!'

'You should not have minded my being busy, poor girl!' said Hannah kindly. 'What is it?' And then, with a sudden instinctive fear of what it was, she added, 'But perhaps you would like to go with me into my own room?'

'No, please, I want to speak to the master too. He's a parson, and must know all about it; and it was him that he went to first!'

'My good woman, if you'll only say what "it" and "he" refer to; tell me a plain story, and I'll give you the best advice I can, whatever your trouble may be.' And Mr. Rivers sat down, looking a little bored—like most men, he had a great dislike to 'scenes,'—but still kindly enough. 'Tell me, is it anything about your husband?'

Hannah had not given him credit for remembering

that fact, or for the patience with which he sat down to listen.

‘My husband!’ cried poor Grace, catching at the word, and bursting out sobbing. ‘Yes, you’re right, sir, he is my husband, and I shall always believe he is, though he says he isn’t, and that I have no claim upon him, no more than any wicked woman in the street. But I was married, Mr. Rivers!’ and the poor girl stood wringing her hands, while her tears fell in floods. ‘He took me to London and married me there, I’ve got my certificate in my pocket, and when we came back everybody knew it. And a year after my little baby was born, my poor little baby that I never told you of, miss, for fear you should send me away!’

‘Is it living?’ said Hannah gravely; having listened, as Mr. Rivers did also, to this torrent of grief-stricken words.

‘Yes; he is living, pretty lamb! though many a time I have wished he wasn’t, after what his father said when he went away. But that might not be true, no more true than what he sent me word yesterday, and I’ve been nigh out of my mind ever since!’

‘What was it? Do keep to the point. I cannot make out the matter if you talk so much,’ said Mr. Rivers.

Hannah sat silent, waiting for what was coming next. An uneasy feeling, not exactly a fear, but not unlike it, came over her as she recalled the long-ago discussion at the Moat-House about the Dixon family.

Grace gathered herself up and looked her master in the face. She was a sweet-looking little woman, usually reticent and quiet enough, but now she seemed desperate with her wrong.

‘Dixon says, sir—that’s my husband; he’s James Dixon of your parish—that I’m not his wife in law, and he can get rid of me whenever he pleases, only he won’t do it if I’ll come back and live with him,



because he likes me, he says, and all the poor children are crying out for me. But that if I won't come back he shall go and marry another woman, Mary Bridges, of Easterham, that lived as cook with Lady Rivers. He'll put up the banns here next Sunday, he says.'

'He cannot. It would be bigamy.'

'Bigamy! That's taking a second wife while your first wife's living, isn't it, sir? And I'm living, though I wasn't his first wife; but I suppose that doesn't matter. Oh, why did I ever take him? But it was all for them poor children's sakes; and he was such a good husband to my sister that I thought for sure he'd be a good husband to me!'

Mr. Rivers started. 'Stop a minute. Your story is very confused; but I think I take it in now. Is James Dixon the Dixon who once came to me asking me to marry him to his deceased wife's sister? And were you that person?'

He spoke in a formal, uncomfortable voice; his cheek reddened a little, and he looked carefully away from the corner where Hannah was sitting. She did not move—how could she?—but she felt hot and red, and wished herself anywhere except where she was, and was obliged to remain.

Grace spoke on, full of eager anxiety. 'Yes, sir, he did come to you, I know, and you told him, he said, that I was not the proper person for him to marry. But he thought I was, and so did I, and so did all the neighbours. You see, sir'—and in her desperation the poor young woman came close up to her master—'I was very fond of my poor sister, and she of me, and when she was dying she begged me to come and take care of her children. Jim was very glad of it too. And so I went to live with him; it was the most natural thing possible, and—it wasn't wrong, miss, was it?'

Hannah felt she must answer the appeal. She did so with a half-inaudible, but distinct, 'No.'

‘Nobody said it was wrong. Nobody blamed me. And the children got so fond of me, and I made Jim so comfortable, that at last he said he couldn’t do without me, and we had better get married at once. Was that wrong, sir?’

‘Yes; it was against the law,’ said Mr. Rivers, in the same cold tone, looking into the fire, and pushing backward and forward the ring he wore on his little finger—poor Rosa’s wedding-ring, taken from her dead hand.

‘But people do it, sir? I know two or three in our village as have done it, and nobody ever said a word against them. And, as it was, people did begin to say a deal against me.’ Grace hung her head a minute, and then lifted it up again in fierce innocence. ‘But it was all lies, sir. I declare before God it was. I was an honest girl always. I told Jim I wouldn’t look at him unless he married me. So he did at last. Look here, sir.’

Mr. Rivers took nervously the marriage-certificate, read it over, gave it back again, and still remained silent.

‘It is all right, sir? I know it is! He did marry me!’

‘Yes—but——’

‘And it wasn’t true what he said when, after a while, he took to drinking, and we squabbled a bit, that he could get rid of me whenever he liked, and marry somebody else? It wasn’t true, sir? Oh, please say it wasn’t true, if only for the sake of my poor baby!’

And Grace stood waiting for the answer that to her was life or death.

All this while Miss Thelluson had sat silent, scarcely lifting her eyes from the carpet, except once or twice to poor Grace’s face, with keen compassion. Not that the question seemed to concern her much, or that she attempted to decide the wrong or right of it, only the whole case seemed so very pitiful. And she had grown

fond of Grace, who was a very good girl, and in feeling and education rather superior to her class.

As for Mr. Rivers, the look in his eyes, which he carefully kept from meeting any other eyes, was not compassion at all; but perplexity, uneasiness, even irritation; the annoyance of a man who finds himself in a difficult position, which he wishes sincerely he were well out of.

To Grace's frantic question he gave no reply at all. She noticed this, and the form of her entreaty changed.

'You don't think I did wrong to marry him, sir? You are a parson and ought to know. Was it wicked, do you think? My sister—that's Mrs. John Dixon, a very good religious woman, and a Methody, too,—told me no; that the Bible said a man was not to marry his wife's sister in her lifetime, which meant that he might do it after her death.'

'Apparently you have studied the subject very closely; closer, I doubt not, than I have,' replied Mr. Rivers, in that hard voice of his. Hannah thought it at the time almost cruel; 'therefore there is the less need for me to give you any opinion, which I am very reluctant to do.'

A blank look came into poor Grace's beseeching eyes. 'But, sir, my sister ——'

'Mrs. Dixon is a Dissenter, many of whom, I believe, think as she does on this matter; but we Church-people can only hold to the Prayer-book and the law. Both forbid such marriages as yours. You being brother and sister ——'

'But we weren't, sir; not even cousins. Indeed I never set eyes on Jim till just before Jane died.'

'You being brother and sister,' irritably repeated Mr. Rivers, 'or the law making you such ——'

'But how could it make us when we were not born so?' pleaded poor Grace with a passionate simplicity.

'You being brother and sister,' Mr. Rivers said for the third time, and now with actual sternness, 'you

could not possibly be married. Or if you were married, as you say, it was wholly against the law. James Dixon has taken advantage of this, as I have heard of other men doing ; but I did not believe it of him.'

Grace turned whiter and whiter. 'Then what he says is really true? I am not his wife?'

'I can't help you; I wish I could,' said Mr. Rivers, at last looking down upon the piteous face. 'I am afraid it is only too true.'

'And my baby, my baby! I don't care for myself much! but my baby!'

'If you ask me to tell you the truth, I must tell it. I refused to marry James Dixon because I knew it would be no marriage at all, and could only be effected by deceiving the clergyman, as I suppose was done. Therefore you are not his wife, and your baby is, of course, an illegitimate child.'

Grace gave a shrill scream that might have been heard through the house. Lest it should be heard, or from some other instinct which she did not reason upon, Miss Thelluson jumped up and shut and bolted the door. When she turned back the poor girl lay on the floor in a dead faint.

Hannah took her up in her arms.

'Please help me!' she said to Mr. Rivers, not looking at him. 'I think the servants are all gone to bed. I hope they are, it will be much better. Once get her up-stairs, and I can look after her myself.'

'Can you? Will it not harm you?'

'Oh, no!' and Hannah looked pitifully on the stony face that lay on her lap. 'It has been very hard for her. Poor thing! poor thing!'

Mr. Rivers said nothing, but silently obeyed his sister-in-law's orders, and between them they carried Grace up to Miss Thelluson's room. Almost immediately afterwards she heard him close the door of his own, and saw no more of him, or any one, except her charge, till morning.

## CHAPTER V.

MISS THELLUSON had always been lamentably deficient in the quality which is called 'respect of persons.' She tended her servant half the night through, as carefully as if poor Grace had been her personal friend and a lady born. There was, indeed, much of the lady about the girl, which was Hannah's great comfort in having her as nurse—a refinement of manner and feeling, and a fine sense of honour, not always found in her class. For since she had been mistress of a large house, and many servants, Miss Thelluson had discovered to her grief that in these days the moral standard of kitchen and parlour was not always the same. Still in her nurse she had always comfort; and Grace, probably on account of this difference, or from other reasons—now patent enough—had seemed to dislike mixing much with the other servants. Her mistress could trust her thoroughly. She was, indeed, quite a personal friend—as every faithful servant ought to be.

When the poor girl came to herself, she poured her whole sad story into her mistress's patient ear.

'I had no idea I was doing wrong—no, that I hadn't!' moaned she. 'Two or three in our village had married their sister's husband. What can a poor working-man do when he is left with a lot of children, but get their aunt to come and look after them? And then, if she's young, or indeed anyhow, people are sure to begin talking. Isn't it better to stop their wicked tongues by marrying her at once, and making all right and comfortable? For they're not comfortable—I wasn't. And they're not real brother and sister, whatever master says. And I'm sure they can be married; for there was our old squire, he married

two sisters, and had two families—one all girls, the other boys. And the eldest son by the second marriage—young Mr. Melville—came in for the property, and is the squire now. And nobody ever said his mother wasn't lawfully married, no more than, when I came home from London, the neighbours said I wasn't married to Jim. Married in church, too,—though we were Methodists both; and neither the parson nor our own minister ever said a word against it.'

Though the poor girl talked in a wild, rambling, excited fashion, still there was some sense in her arguments; and when she implored Miss Thelluson to speak to Mr. Rivers again, and repeat all she said, and ask if there was not a chance of his having been mistaken, or if he could not, at least, prevent the marriage with Mary Bridges, Hannah scarcely knew what to say. At last, just to soothe her—for, out of consideration to her mistress, Grace had kept her misery to herself for a day and a half, till it had almost driven her frantic—she promised to do her best in the matter.

'And you'll do it at once, miss; and tell master that whatever is done should be done at once, or Jim will get married, and then what is to become of me and my poor child? It isn't myself that I care for. I didn't do wrong—God knows I didn't! And I don't mind what folk say of me; but it's my poor boy. And it's Jim, too, a little; I don't want Jim to do wrong either.'

And she shed a few tears, over even the bad fellow, who, she confessed, had in his drunken fits beaten her many a time.

'But I forgive him; for he was drunk,' said she, using that too common but mistaken excuse. 'And, then, I had the children to comfort me. Such dear little things they were, and so fond of me! And he'll go and bring that woman Bridges to be step-mother over them, and she is a bad temper, and she's sure to

ill-treat them, poor lambs!—Jenny's poor little motherless lambs! I must go back to them directly.' And she sat up in bed, in an agony of distress. 'O miss, please give me my clothes, and I'll get up and dress, and be off by daylight.'

This bitter grief, not over her own boy—who, she said, was safe with his grandmother—but over her dead sister's children, touched Hannah to the quick. She could understand it so well.

'You must lie quiet,' said she; 'or rather you must go back to your own bed beside Rosie. You have quite forgotten Rosie.'

The right chord was struck. The young woman had, evidently, a strong sense of duty, besides being excessively fond of her charge; for Rosie was a little creature that won everybody. So she sat up, fastened back her dishevelled hair, and with her mistress's help tottered back to the nursery. Soon she settled herself in her customary corner, stretching out a caressing hand to the crib beside her bed, where, sleeping quite alone, but as sweetly as if all the angels of heaven were watching over her, little Rosie lay.

'Ah, baby, baby,' Grace sobbed, 'what would have become of me all these months without you, baby?'

What would become of many a miserable woman, if it were not for a baby?

How Grace had ever left her own Hannah could not imagine; but found afterwards it was the hard necessity of earning money, the grandmother being very poor, and Jim Dixon having gone off in search of work, and left the whole combined families on the old woman's hands. Now he reclaimed his three eldest; but disowned Grace's unfortunate babe.

'My boy—remember my boy!' implored she, as in the dim dawn of the morning her mistress left her, hoping her utter exhaustion would incline her to sleep. 'Promise me that you will speak to the master, if only for the sake of my poor boy.'

Hannah promised ; but when she went back to her room and thought it all over—for she could not sleep—she was sorely perplexed. There might be some mistake, even though Mr. Rivers, who was a magistrate as well as a clergyman, spoke so decidedly. Grace's arguments were strong ; and the case of Mr. Melville, whom she had herself met at the Moat-House, was, to say the least, curious. She herself knew nothing of the law. If she could only speak to anybody who did know, instead of to her brother-in-law ! Once she thought of writing to Lady Dunsmore ; but, then, what would the countess imagine ? No doubt, that she wanted the information for herself. And Hannah grew hot all over with shame and pain, and another feeling, which was neither the one nor the other, and which she did not stay to analyse, except that it made her feel more reluctant than ever to name the subject again to Mr. Rivers.

Still, Grace was so unfortunate ; so innocently wicked—if wickedness there was. And the projected marriage of Dixon seemed much more so.

‘Mr. Rivers will never allow it in his church. He surely would not sanction such a cruel thing, even if it be legal. And there is no time to lose. Whatever it costs me, I must speak to him at once.’

With this resolution, and deadening her mind to any other thoughts, Hannah lay down, and tried to sleep, but in vain. After an hour or two of restless tossing, she dressed herself, and descended to the breakfast-room.

There she found Mr. Rivers playing with little Rosie—contrary to his habit ; for he seldom saw her of mornings. He looked a little confused at being discovered.

‘I sent for the child,’ said he. ‘Don’t you think, Aunt Hannah, she is old enough to come down to breakfast with us ?’

‘Not quite,’ said Hannah, smiling ; ‘but she can



stay and play about on the floor. I daresay she will be good—won't she, auntie's darling?'

And auntie clasped fondly the little thing, who had tottered up to her and hid the pretty fair head in her gown-skirt. Mr. Rivers looked at them, and turned suddenly away—as he often did now.

Rosie behaved beautifully—for about five minutes!—and then began to perpetrate a few ignorant naughtinesses; such as pulling down a silver fork, and a butter-knife, with a great clatter; then creeping beneath the table, and trying to stand upright there, which naturally caused a bump on the head and a scream so violent that Aunt Hannah, frightened out of all proprieties, quitted her seat and walked up and down the room, soothing in her arms the piteous little wailer.

'This will never do,' said papa sternly. 'Pray take the child up-stairs.'

Which Hannah thankfully did, and stayed away some minutes; feeling that, after all, the nursery was the safest, the most peaceful, and the pleasantest room in the house.

When she came back, her brother-in-law had finished breakfast, and was standing, gazing out of the sunshiny window in a sort of dream. His temporary crossness had subsided; his face, though grave, was exceedingly sweet. Now that she had grown used to it, and it had gradually brightened, if not into happiness, at least into composure and peace, Hannah sometimes thought she had seldom seen so thoroughly sweet a face—such a combination of the man and the woman—that beautiful woman whose picture at the Moat-House she often looked at, and wondered what kind of young creature the first Lady Rivers had been. Apparently, not like the second Lady Rivers at all.

It was exactly his mother's smile with which Mr. Rivers turned round now.

'So the little maid is comforted at last. What in-

fluence you women have over babies, and what helpless beings we men are with them! Why, it is as much as papa can do to keep Miss Rosie quiet for five minutes, and Aunt Hannah has her the whole day. Do you never tire of her?’

‘Never. Nor more does Grace, who has an instinctive love for children—which all women have not, I assure you. This is what makes her so valuable as a nurse.’

Hannah said this intentionally; for, not two minutes before, the girl had run after her with a wild white face. ‘Have you spoken to the master? Will you speak to him? Don’t forsake me! Ask him to help me! O Miss Thelluson, I’m fond of *your* child—think of mine!’ Even if Hannah had not liked and respected Grace so much, to her good heart, now open to all children for Rosie’s sake, this argument would have struck home.

‘I hope the young woman is better this morning, and that you did not fatigue yourself too much with her last night,’ said Mr. Rivers coldly; and then began speaking of something else. But Hannah, bracing up her courage, determined to discharge her unpleasant duty at once.

‘Have you ten minutes to spare? Because I have a special message to you from Mrs. Dixon.’

‘What Mrs. Dixon?’

‘Grace. She insists upon it she has a legal right to the name.’

‘She is under a complete delusion, and the sooner she wakes up out of it the better. Pray, Hannah, do not, with your weak womanish pity, encourage her for a moment.’

Mr. Rivers spoke sharply—more sharply than any gentleman ought to speak to a lady; though men sometimes think they are justified in doing so—to wives and sisters. But her brother-in-law had never thus spoken to Hannah before—she was not used to

it; and she looked at him, first surprised, then slightly indignant.

‘My pity is not weak or womanish, nor do I call it pity at all. It is simple love of justice. Either Grace is married or not married. All I want is, for her sake and the child’s, to find out the exact law of the case.’

‘Which is just what I told her last night. No doubt she was married, as she says; only the marriage, being illegal, is null and void.’

‘But she says such marriages are not uncommon.’

‘I believe they are not, in the lower classes. Nevertheless, those who risk them must take the consequences. The wife is only the mistress, and the children are base-born. I beg your pardon for putting plain facts into plain language, but you compel me. Why will you meddle in this unpleasant matter? It can be nothing to you.’

And he looked at her keenly as he spoke, but Hannah did not perceive it just then. Her interest was too strongly excited for the cruel position of poor Grace. She recalled involuntarily an old argument of Lady Dunsmore on this very subject—whether any wrong could be exactly ‘nothing’ to any honest-minded man or woman, even though he or she were not personally affected thereby.

‘Pardon me,’ she answered gently; ‘it is something to me to see any human being in great misery, if by any possibility that misery could be removed. Are you quite sure you are right as to the law? It cannot always have been what you say, because Grace tells me of a certain Mr. Melville who visits at the Moat-House’—and Hannah repeated the story. ‘Can it be possible,’ added she, ‘that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor?’

‘No. But in 1835 the law was altered, or at least modified: all such marriages then existing were confirmed, and all future ones declared illegal. Melville

escaped by a hair-breadth only, his parents having been married in 1834.'

'Then, what was right one year was wrong the next? That is, to my weak womanly notions, a very extraordinary form of justice.'

Her brother-in-law regarded her inquiringly. Evidently he was surprised; did not at first take in the intense single-mindedness of the woman who could thus throw herself out of herself, and indignantly argue the cause of another, even though it trenched upon ground so delicate that most feminine instincts would have let it alone. He looked at her; and then his just nature divining the utter innocence and indifference out of which she spoke, he said nothing: only sighed.

'You are a very good woman, Hannah—I know that, and Grace ought to be exceedingly obliged to you. But you cannot help her—not in the least.'

'And cannot you? Could you not, at least, prevent the man's marrying another woman—as he means to do in your very church next Sunday?'

'Does he? The brute!' cried Mr. Rivers, passionately. Then, relapsing into his former coldness—'I fear nothing can be done. The former marriage being invalid, he can contract another at any time—legally, I mean; the moral question is a different thing.'

'So it seems,' said Hannah, bitterly; for she was vexed at his manner—it seemed so hard, so unlike his usual warm, generous way of judging matters. 'But,' she argued, resolved to leave not a stone unturned for her poor servant's sake, 'if the marriage with Grace was unlawful, why cannot he be prosecuted for that, as for bigamy or similar offences? Either it was a crime or it was not. If it was, punish it by the law; if not——'

'You reason like a woman,' interrupted Mr. Rivers, angrily. 'When I, a man, have already argued the question with myself in every possible way——' He

stopped abruptly. 'I mean that you women will only see two sides of a subject—the right and the wrong.'

'Yes, thank Heaven!'

'Whereas there are many sides, and a man requires to see them all. But we are slipping into ethical discussion, which you and I are rather prone to, Aunt Hannah. Suppose instead, we go and look at our roses?'

Go and look at roses when a fellow-creature was hanging on every breath of theirs for hope or despair! Hannah had never thought her brother-in-law so hard-hearted.

'I can't go,' she said. 'I must first speak to poor Grace. What shall I say to her?'

'Whatever you like. But I think the less you say the better. And perhaps, if you could gently hint it, the sooner she leaves us the better. Of course she will have to leave.'

'Leave!' repeated Hannah, much startled by the new phase which this most unlucky affair was assuming. 'Why "of course?" I never thought of her leaving.'

'Do you not see? But no, you cannot—you see nothing at all!' muttered Bernard Rivers to himself. 'Do you not perceive,' continued he earnestly, 'that we live in a house on a hill, morally as well as physically? That a clergyman must keep out of the slightest shadow of evil comment? I especially, both as rector of Easterham and as Sir Austin's son, must expect to have my acts and motives sharply criticised, and perhaps many a motive ascribed to me which does not exist. No; I have been thinking the matter over all morning, and I see no alternative. Grace ought to go. I believe Lady Rivers and all at the Moat-House would say the same.'

Hannah drew back. She had never resisted her brother-in-law before—not even in cases where she had thought him a little wrong: though this happened seldom. She had found out that, like most

men who are neither selfish nor egotistical, he was remarkably just. Now she felt him to be unjust. To send away Rosie's fond and faithful nurse would be to the child herself a very harmful thing—to Grace, in her circumstances, a bitter unkindness, not to say an actual wrong; and Miss Thelluson was not the woman to stand tamely by and see a wrong done to any human being if she could help it.

Still it was needful to be very guarded, and she might even have been less courageous, had not the allusion to the Moat-House and its opinions—always more or less shallow and worldly—stirred up in her something of that righteous indignation which blazed up, quite unexpectedly sometimes, in Aunt Hannah's quiet bosom.

'Excuse me,' she said, more formally than she was used to speak, in the free and pleasant, even affectionate relations that now subsisted between Mr. Rivers and herself. 'Lady Rivers is mistress of the Moat-House, but not of the House on the Hill. When you did me the honour to give me that position, you distinctly said I should manage it as I chose. I claim my right. For Rosie's sake I must beg of you not to send away her nurse.'

'Good heavens! you will not see! How can I, placed as I am, keep in my house a woman who is disgraced for life?'

'Not disgraced; only unfortunate. She is a very good girl indeed. She protests solemnly she had not an idea that in marrying James Dixon she was doing wrong.'

'How you women do hold to your point!' said Mr. Rivers, in great irritation, almost agitation. 'But she has done wrong. She has broken the law. In the eye of the law she is neither more nor less than a poor seduced girl, mother of a bastard child.'

Now Hannah Thelluson was an exceedingly 'proper' person. That is, though not ignorant of the wicked-

ness of the world—the things ‘done in secret,’ as St. Paul terms them—she agreed with St. Paul that it was a shame to speak of them, unless unavoidable, and for some good end. If duty required, she would have waded through any quantity of filth; but she did not like it; she preferred keeping in clean paths if possible. Oftentimes she had been startled, not to say shocked, by the light way in which some fast young ladies who came about the Moat-House, and even the Misses Rivers themselves, talked of things which she and the girls of her generation scarcely knew existed, and certainly would never have spoken about, except to their own mothers. And among the qualities in Mr. Rivers which first drew her towards him was one which women soon instinctively find out in men—as men, they say, in women—that rare delicacy of thought and action which no outward decorum can ever imitate, because it springs from an innate chastity of soul. Thus, when in his excitement Mr. Rivers used such exceedingly plain, ugly words, Miss Thelluson looked at him in intense astonishment, and blushed all over her face.

Some people called Hannah a plain woman—that is, she was tall, and thin, and colourless, not unlike the white lily she had been compared to; but when she blushed, it was like the white lily with a rosy sunset glow upon it. For the moment she looked absolutely pretty. Something in Mr. Rivers’s eyes made her conscious that he thought so—or at least that he was thinking of her, and not of poor Grace or the subject in hand at all.

‘Why do you not oftener wear white? I like it so much,’ he said, softly touching her gown, a thick muslin, embroidered with black, which she thought would be a sort of mediæval compromise. She was so fond of white, that it was half regretfully she had decided she was too old to wear it. But among her new dresses she could not resist this one. It pleased

her to have it noticed, or would have done, had not her mind been full of other things.

‘I was going to the pic-nic in Langmead Wood, you know; but never mind that just now. Before I start I shall have to tell poor Grace her doom. A heavy blow it will be. Do not ask me to make it worse by telling her she must leave us.’

Bernard was silent.

‘I cannot bear to resist your will,’ pleaded she. ‘When I first came here, I made up my mind to obey you—that is, in all domestic things—even as *she* would have done. But even she would have resisted you in this. Were she living now, I am sure she would say exactly as I do—dear, tender-hearted Rosa!’

‘Why do you name her?’ said Mr. Rivers in a low tone. ‘Are you not afraid?’

‘Afraid! Why should I be? Of all women I ever knew, my sister had the truest heart, the quickest sense of justice. If she thought a thing was right, she would say it—ay, and do it, too—in face of the whole world. So would I.’

‘Would you? Are you one of those women who have courage to defy the world?’

‘I think I am, if I were tried; but I never have been tried. I hope I never may be; and I hope, too, that you will save me from doing any more in the defiant line,’ added she, smiling, ‘by retracting what you said, and letting Grace stay.’

‘But how can she stay? How can you keep her miserable story a secret?’

‘I should not keep it a secret at all. I would tell everybody the whole truth, explaining that we drew the line between guilt and innocence; that you refused to marry James Dixon to this new wife of his, but that the poor creature whom he had made believe she was his wife should stay under the shelter of your roof as long as she liked. That, I am sure,



would be the just and right way to act. Shall it be so?’

‘You are a courageous woman, Hannah. But,’ added he, with a sad kind of smile, ‘it is like the courage of little boys venturing on our frozen pond there: they do not know how deep it is. No, no; I cannot thus run counter to my own people and to all the world. In truth, I dare not.’

‘Dare not!’ Hannah blazed up in that sudden way of hers, whenever she saw a wrong done — doubly so when any one she cared for did it. She had lived with Mr. Rivers a long time, and whether she cared for him or not, she had never seen anything in him which made her cease to respect him, — until now. ‘Dare not!’ she repeated, almost doubting if she had heard truly. ‘When there is a certain course of conduct open to him, be it right or wrong, I always believed that the last reason an honest man gave for declining it would be, “I dare not!”’

The moment she had made this bitter speech — one of the old sarcastic speeches of her girlhood — Hannah saw it was a mistake, that she was taking with Mr. Rivers a liberty which even a flesh-and-blood sister had no right to take, and she was certain he felt it so. All the proud Norman blood rushed up to his forehead.

‘I never knew I was a coward, Miss Thelluson. Since you think me one, I will relieve you of my company.’

Opening the French window at once, he passed out of it into the garden, and disappeared.

Hannah stood, overwhelmed. During all the months they had lived under the same roof, and in the close intimacy that was inevitable under the circumstances, she and her brother-in-law had never had anything approaching to a quarrel. They had differed widely sometimes, but always amicably and upon abstract rather than personal grounds. Those ‘sharp

words,' which even the dearest friends say one to another sometimes, had never passed between them. His extraordinary sweet temper—oh, how keenly Hannah now appreciated her sister's fond praise of the blessing it was to have a sweet-tempered husband!—his utter absence of worldliness and self-conceit; and that warm good heart, which, as the cloud of misery slowly passed away from him, shone out in everything he did and said;—all these things made quarrelling with Bernard Rivers almost impossible.

'What have I done?' thought Hannah, half laughing, half crying. 'He must think me a perfect virago. I will apologise the minute he comes back.'

But he did not come back: not though she waited an hour in the breakfast-room, putting off her household duties, and even that other, as painful as it was inevitable, speaking to poor Grace: but he never came. Then, going into the hall, she saw that his hat and coat had vanished. She knew his appointments of the morning, and was sure now that he was gone and would be away the whole day.

Then Hannah became more than perplexed—thoroughly unhappy. Even Grace's forlorn face, when she told her—she had not the heart to tell more—that Mr. Rivers could promise nothing, but that she hoped he would prevent the marriage, if possible,—failed to affect her much; and Rosie's little arms round her neck, and the fond 'murmur' of 'Tannie, Tannie,' did not give nearly the comfort that they were wont to do.

'Tannie has been naughty,' said she, feeling a strange relief in confessing her sins to the unconscious child. 'Tannie has vexed papa. When Rosie grows up she must never vex papa. She must try to be a comfort to him: he has no one else.'

Poor Hannah! She had done wrong, and she knew it. When this was the case, nothing and nobody could soothe Hannah Thelluson.

With a heavy heart, she got ready for the pic-nic—a family affair between this house and the Moat-House, which was still full of visitors. The girls were to fetch first their brother from the school-house, and then herself, but when the carriage came round, Mr. Rivers was not in it.

‘Bernard is thoroughly sulky to-day,’ said the eldest sister. ‘He doesn’t seem to know his own mind at all, whether he will go or won’t; but perhaps he may turn up by-and-bye. Don’t let us bother about him. Such a splendid day it is for a pic-nic, and Langmead Wood at its loveliest time! Do let us enjoy ourselves.’

They did enjoy themselves, and certainly, Hannah thought, were not much ‘bothered’ by their brother’s sulkiness, or afflicted by his absence. The fraternal bond is so free and easy that, except in cases of very special affection, brothers and sisters can speedily console themselves with somebody else.

But with herself it was not so. She thought the girls rather heartless in missing Bernard so little. She missed him a good deal, and set down her regrets as conscience-stings. They hindered half her enjoyment of the lovely wood, just putting on its green clothing, full of primroses and hyacinths, and nest-building birds pouring out on all sides a rapture of spring-time song. She scarcely heard it, or hearing it only gave her pain.

‘I was unkind to him,’ she thought; ‘unkind to a man whose wife is dead, who goes lonely through the world, and needs every allowance that can be made for him, every comfort that can be given him. He, too, who is always so considerate and kind to me! How ungrateful I have been!’

So absorbed was she in her contrition that she did not notice for ever so long what otherwise would have interested her much—a very patent love-affair now going on between Adeline Rivers and this same

Mr. Melville, the young squire whom Grace had mentioned. To bring him 'to the point,' as one of the girls confidentially told her, this pic-nic had been planned, hoping that the tender influence of the woody glades of Langmead would open his heart, and turn it from nebulous courtship to substantial marriage—a marriage evidently highly acceptable to the whole family. Which Hannah thought rather odd, considering what she knew of the family opinions, and that it was but the mere chance of a marriage happening before instead of after the year 1835, which saved Herbert Melville from being in the same position as poor Grace's son—a 'base-born' child.

Late in the afternoon, Bernard appeared. They were all sitting in a circle round the remnants of the dinner. He shook hands with everybody, ending with Miss Thelluson. Words were impossible there; but Hannah tried to make her eyes say, 'Are we friends? I am so sorry.' The apology fell hopeless: he was looking in another direction, and she shrank back into herself, feeling more unhappy, in a foolish, causeless, childish sort of way, than she remembered to have done for at least ten years. If

'To be wroth with one we love  
Doth work like madness in the brain,'

—to be wroth with ourselves for having wronged one we love is pretty nearly as bad; except that in such a case we are able to punish ourselves unlimitedly, as Hannah did, with the most laudable pertinacity, for a full hour. She listened with patience to endless discussions, *tête-à-tête*, among Lady Rivers and her girls, upon the chances and prospects of the young couple for whose benefit the pic-nic was made—who, poor things, knew well what they were brought there for, and what was expected of them before returning home. At any other time she would have pitied, or smiled at, this pair of lovers, who finally slipped aside among the

trees, out of sight, though not out of comment, of their affectionate families; and she might have felt half amused, half indignant, at the cool, public way in which the whole matter was discussed. But now her heart was too sore and sad; she just listened politely to everybody that wanted a listener, and meantime heard painfully every word her brother-in-law said, and saw every movement he made—not one, however, in her direction. She made a martyr of herself, did everything she did not care to do, and omitted the only thing she longed to do—to go up straight to Mr. Rivers and say, ‘Are you angry with me still? Do you never mean to forgive me?’

Apparently not, for he kept sedulously out of the way, and yet near her, though not a word between them was possible. This behaviour at last tantalised her so much, that she fairly ran away: stole quietly out of the circle, and hid herself in a nut-wood dell, filling her hands with blue hyacinths.

‘Hannah, what are you doing?’

‘Gathering a nosegay to take home to Rosie.’

A brief question and answer. Yet they seemed to clear away the cloud. Mr. Rivers stood watching a little while, and then began helping her to gather the flowers.

‘How continually you think of Rosie’s pleasure. But you do of everybody’s. What a warm good heart you have!’

‘Have I? I doubt it,’ answered Hannah, with a faltering voice, for she was touched by his gentleness, by that wonderfully sweet nature he had—so rare in a man, yet not unmanly, if men could only believe this! Hannah had long ceased to wonder why her brother-in-law was so universally beloved.

‘I think you and I rather quarrelled this morning, Aunt Hannah? We never did so before, did we?’

‘No.’

‘Then don’t let us do it again. Here is my hand.’

Hannah took it joyfully, tried to speak, and signally failed.

‘You don’t mean to say you are crying?’

‘I am afraid I am. It is very silly, but I can’t help it. I never was used to quarrelling, and I have been quite unhappy all day. You see,’ and she raised her face with the innocent, child-like expression it sometimes wore—more child-like he once told her, than any creature he ever saw over ten years old,—‘you see, I had behaved so ill to you—you that are unfailingly kind to me.’

‘Not kind—say grateful. Oh, Hannah!’ he said, with great earnestness, ‘I owe you more, much more, than I can ever repay. I was sinking into a perfect slough of despond, becoming a miserable, useless wretch, a torment to myself and everybody about me, when it came into my head to send for you. You roused me, you made me feel that my life was not ended, that I had still work to do, and strength to do it with. Hannah, if any human being ever saved another, you saved me.’

Hannah was much moved. Still more so when, dropping his head and playing absently with a mass of dead leaves from under which blue violets were springing, he added—

‘I sometimes think *she* must have sent you to me,—do you?’

‘I think thus much—that she would rejoice if I, or any one, was able to do you any good. Any generous woman would, after she had gone away, and could do you good no more. She would wish you to be happy—even if it were with another woman—another wife.’

Hannah said this carefully, deliberately; she had long waited for a chance of saying it, that he might know exactly what was her feeling about second marriages, did he contemplate anything of the sort. He evidently caught her meaning, and was pained by it.

‘Thank you. Rosa said much the same thing to me, just before she died. But I have no intention of marrying again. At least not now.’

Hannah could not tell why, but she felt relieved—even glad. The incubus of several weeks was taken off at once, as well as that other burden—which she had no idea would have weighed her down so much—the feeling of being at variance with her brother-in-law.

He sat down beside her, on a felled log; and they began talking of all sorts of things—the beauty of the wood, the wonderfully delicious spring day; and how Rosie would have enjoyed it, how she would enjoy it by-and-bye, when she was old enough to be brought to picnics at Langmead. All trivial subjects, lightly and gaily discussed; but they were straws to show how the wind blew, and Hannah was sure now that the wind blew fair again—that Mr. Rivers had forgiven and forgotten everything.

Not everything; for he asked suddenly if she had told Grace the bitter truth, and how she bore it?

‘Patiently, of course; but she is nearly broken-hearted.’

‘Poor soul! And you think, Hannah, that if she—Rosa—had been here, she would have let Grace stay?’

‘I am sure she would. She was so just, so pure, so large in all her judgments; she would have seen at once that Grace meant no harm—that no real guilt could attach to her, only misfortune; and, therefore, it was neither necessary nor right to send her away.’

‘Very well. I came to tell you that she shall not be sent away. I have reconsidered the question, and am prepared to risk all the consequences of keeping her,—for my little girl’s sake,—and yours.’

Hannah burst into broken thanks, and then fairly began to cry again. She could not tell what was the matter with her. Her joy was as silly and weak-

minded as her sorrow. She was so ashamed of herself as to be almost relieved when Mr. Rivers, laughing at her in a kindly, pleasant way, rose up and rejoined his sisters.

The rest of the day she had scarcely ten words with him; yet she felt as happy as possible. Peace was restored between him and herself; and Grace's misery was lightened a little, though, alas! not much. Perhaps, since even her master said she had done no intentional wrong, the poor girl would get used to her lot in time. It could not be a very dreary lot—to take care of Rosie. And Aunt Hannah longed for her little darling,—wished she had her in her arms, to show her the heaps of spring flowers, and the rabbits with their funny flashes of white tails, appearing and disappearing beneath the tender ferns that were shooting up under the dead leaves of last year,—life out of death, joy out of sorrow, as God meant it to be.

Nay, even the Rivers family and the rest seemed to drop a little of their formal worldliness, and became young men and maidens, rejoicing in the spring. Especially the well-watched pair of lovers; who had evidently come to an understanding, as desired; for when, after a lengthy absence, they reappeared, bringing two small sticks apiece, as their contributions to the fire that was to boil the kettle, their shyness and awkwardness were only equalled by their expression of blushing content.

Why should not old-maid Hannah be content likewise? though she was not in her teens, like Adeline, and had no lover! But she had a tender feeling about lovers still; and in this blithe and happy spring-time it stirred afresh; and her heart was moved in a strange sort of way—half pleasant, half sad.

Besides, this day happened to be an anniversary. Not that Hannah was among those who keep anniversaries; on the contrary, she carefully avoided them; but she never forgot them. Many a time, when nobody



knew, she was living over again, with an ineffaced and ineffaceable vividness, certain days and certain hours, burnt into her memory with the red-hot iron of affliction. The wounds had healed over, but the scars remained. For years she had never seen yellow November fogs without recalling the day when Arthur sailed; nor cowslips, but she remembered having a bunch of them in her hand when she got the letter telling her of his death—just as he was ‘getting up May-hill’—as they often say of consumptive people. And for years—oh, how many years it seemed—after that day, spring days had given her cruel pain: as if the world had all come alive again, and Arthur was dead.

To-day, even though it was the very anniversary of his death, she felt differently. There came back into her heart that long-forgotten sense of spring, which always used to come with the primroses and cowslips, when Arthur and she played together among them. The world *had* come alive again, and Arthur had come alive too; but more as when he was a little boy and her playfellow than her lover. A strange kind of fancy entered her mind—a wonder what he was like now—boy, or man, or angel: and what he was doing in that land, which, try as we will, we cannot realise, and are not meant to realise, in any way that would narrow our duties here. Whether he still remained the same, or had altered, as she was conscious she had altered; grown as she had grown,—and suffered; no, he could not suffer, as she had suffered these ten, eleven years? Did he want her? or was he happy without her? Would they, when they met, meet as betrothed lovers, or as the angels in heaven, ‘who neither marry nor are given in marriage?’

All those thoughts, and many more, went flitting across her mind as Miss Thelluson sat in a place she often took—it saved talking, and she liked it—beside the old coachman, on the Moat-House carriage, as

they drove in the soft May twilight, through glade and woodland, moor and down, to Easterham village. And, when far off, she saw the light shining from a window of the House on the Hill, her heart leaped to it—her heart, not her fancy—for there was her warm, happy human home. There under that peaceful roof, centred all her duties, all her delights; there, in the quiet nursery, little Rosie lay sleeping, ready to wake up next morning fresh as the flowers, merry as a young lambkin, developing more and more in her opening child-life—the most wonderful and lovely sight God ever gives us, and He gives it us every day—a growing human soul.

‘Oh, if Rosa could only see her now—the daughter for whom she died!’ sighed Hannah; and then suppressed the sigh, as irreligious, unjust. ‘No. I think if Rosa came back to us, and saw us now—him and her baby, and me—she would not be unhappy. She would say—what I should say myself, if I died—that when God takes our dead from us, He means us not to grieve for ever, only to remember.’

## CHAPTER VI.

HANNAH was fond of the Moat-House; in the way that we are often fond of places or people thrown temporarily in our way, thinking: ‘I should like you if I knew you,’ but well aware that this will never happen. Often, as in her walks she passed by the grey old walls, she could quite understand Mr. Rivers’s strong clinging to the only home he ever knew, the resting-place of his family for generations. She sympathised keenly in his admiration for its quaint nooks and corners within—its quainter aspect without; for the moat had been drained, and turned into a terraced garden, and the old drawbridge into a bridge leading

to it; so that it was the most original and interesting house possible.

Miss Thelluson would have gone there often, but for a conviction that its inhabitants did not approve of this. Wide as their circle was, and endless as were their entertainments, it was not what Hannah called a hospitable house. That is, it opened its doors wide at stated times; gave the most splendid dinners and balls; but if you went in accidentally or uninvited, you were received both by the family and servants with civil surprise. Hannah was once calling of an evening after an early dinner; when the effort to get her an egg to her tea seemed to throw the whole establishment, from the butler downwards, into such dire confusion, that she never owned to being 'hungry' at the Moat-House again.

Nor was it a place to bring a child to. Rosie, always good at home, was sure to be naughty at the Moat-House; and then grandmamma and aunts always told papa of it, and papa came back and complained to Aunt Hannah; and Aunt Hannah was sometimes sorry, sometimes indignant. So the end was that she and the child never went there unless specially invited; and that paradise of most little people—'grandmamma's house' and 'grandmamma's garden'—was to Rosie Rivers a perfect blank.

Nevertheless, Aunt Hannah never looked at the lovely old house, without a sense of tender regret; for it was so very lovely, and might have been so dear. Perhaps it would be, one day, when Rosie, its heir's sole heiress, reigned as mistress there. A change which another ten or fifteen years were likely enough to bring about, as Sir Austin was an old man, and young Austin, the hapless eldest son, would never inherit anything. Everybody knew, though nobody said it, that the Rev. Bernard Rivers would be in reality his father's successor. Even Lady Rivers, who was a rich young widow when she became Sir Austin's

wife, and had a comfortable jointure house in another county, openly referred to that time, and as openly regretted that her step-son did not turn his thoughts to a second marriage.

‘But he will soon, of course; and you ought to take every opportunity of suggesting it to him, Miss Thelluson; for, in his position, it is really his duty, and he says one of the great advantages you are to him is, that you always keep him up to his duty.’

To these remarks Hannah seldom answered more than a polite smile. She made a point of never discussing Mr. Rivers’s marriage: first, because if his family had no delicacy on the subject, she had; and, second, because every day convinced her more and more that he was sincere when he told her he had no present intention of the kind.

Yet he was perfectly cheerful now—not exactly in his old buoyant fashion, but in a contented, equable way that Hannah, at least, liked much better. Theirs was a cheerful house, too. ‘Use hospitality without grudging’ was Bernard’s motto; and he used it, as she once suggested to him, principally to those ‘who cannot repay thee.’ So the House on the Hill—the clergyman’s house—was seldom empty, but had always bed and board at the service of any who required it, or enjoyed it. Still, this kind of hospitality, simple as it was, kept Hannah very busy always. Not that she objected to it: nay, she rather liked it; it roused her dormant social qualities, made her talk more and look brighter and better—indeed some people congratulated her on having grown ten years younger since she came to Easterham. She felt so herself, at any rate.

Besides this outside cheerfulness in their daily life, she and her brother-in-law, since their quarrel and its making-up, seemed to have got on together better than ever. Her mind was settled on the marriage

question; she dreaded no immediate changes, and he seemed to respect her all the more for having 'shown fight' on the question of Grace Dixon—alas, Mrs. Dixon no longer now!—she took off her wedding-ring, and was called plain Grace; she had no right to any other name.

'And my boy has no name either,' she said once, with a pale, patient face, when, the worst of her sorrow having spent itself, she went about her duties, outwardly resigned.

'Never mind!' Hannah replied, with a choke in her throat. 'He must make himself one.' And then they laid the subject aside, and discussed it no more.

Neither did she and her brother-in-law open it up again. It was one of the sore inevitables, the painful awkwardnesses, best not talked about. In truth—in the position in which she and Mr. Rivers stood to one another—how could they talk about it?

The Rivers's family did sometimes: they had a genius for discussing unpleasant topics. But happily the approaching marriage of Mr. Melville and Adeline annihilated this one.

'Under the circumstances nobody could speak to him about it, you know; it might hurt his feelings,' said the happy bride-elect. 'And pray keep Grace out of his way, for he knows her well; she was brought up in his family. A very nice family, are they not?'

Hannah allowed they were. She sometimes watched the dowager Mrs. Melville among her tribe of step-daughters, whom she had brought up, and who returned her care with unwonted tenderness,—thought of poor Grace, and—sighed.

Adeline's marriage was carried out without delay. It seemed a great satisfaction to everybody, and a relief likewise. Young Mr. Melville, who was rather of a butterfly temperament, had fluttered about this nosegay of pretty girls for the last ten years. He had, in

fact, loved through the family—beginning with the eldest, when they were playfellows, then transferring his affections to Helen, and being supposed to receive a death-blow on her engagement; which, however, he speedily recovered, to carry on a long flirtation with the handsome Bertha; finally, to everybody's wonder, he settled down to Adeline, who was the quietest, the least pretty, and the only one out of the four who really loved him.

Bertha was vexed at first, but soon took consolation. 'After all, I only cared to flirt with him, and I can do it just as well when he is my brother-in-law. Brothers are so stupid; but a brother-in-law of one's own age, will be so very convenient. Miss Thelluson, don't you find it so?'

Hannah scarcely answered this—one of the many odd things which she often heard said at the Moat-House. However, she did not consider it her province to notice them. The Riverses were Bernard's 'people,' as he affectionately called them, and his loving eye saw all their faults very small, and their virtues very large. Hannah tried, for his sake, to do the same. Only the better she knew them the more she determined on one thing—to hold firmly to her point, that she, and she alone, should have the bringing-up of little Rosie.

'I daresay you will think me very conceited,' she said one night to Rosie's father—the winter evenings were drawing in again, and they were sitting together talking, in that peaceful hour after 'the children are asleep'—'but I do believe that I, her mother's sister, can bring up Rosie better than anybody else. First, because I love her best, she being of my own blood; secondly, because not all women—not even all mothers—have the real motherly heart. Shall I tell you a story I heard to-day, and Lady Rivers instanced it as "right discipline?" But it is only a baby-story; it may weary you.'

‘Nothing ever wearies me that concerns Rosie—and you.’

‘Well, then, there is an Easterham lady—you meet her often at dinner-parties—young and pretty, and capital at talking of maternal duties. She has a little girl of six, and the little girl did wrong in some small way, and was told to say she was sorry. “I have said it, mamma, seventy-times-seven—to myself,” (A queer speech; but children do say such queer things sometimes; Rosie does already.) “But you must say it to me,” said mamma. “I won’t,” said the child. And then the mother stood, beating and shaking her, at intervals, for nearly an hour. At last the little thing fell into convulsions of sobbing. “Fetch me the water-jug, and I will pour it over her.” (Which she did, wetting her through.) “This is the way I conquer my children.” Now,’ said Hannah Thelluson, with flashing eyes, ‘if any strange woman were to try to “conquer” *my* child——’

‘Keep yourself quiet, Hannah,’ said Mr. Rivers, half smiling, and gently patting her hand. ‘No “strange woman” shall ever interfere between you and Rosie.’

‘And you will promise never to send her to school, at Paris or anywhere else, as Lady Rivers proposed the other day, when she is old enough. Oh, papa’ (she sometimes called him ‘papa,’ as a compromise between ‘Bernard,’ which he wished, and ‘Mr. Rivers’) ‘I think I should go frantic if anybody were to take my child away from me.’

‘Nobody ever shall,’ said he, earnestly pressing her hand, which he had not yet let go. Then after a pause, and a troubled stirring of the fire—his habit when he was perplexed—he added, ‘Hannah, do you ever look into the future at all?’

‘Rosie’s future? Yes, often.’

‘No; your own.’

‘I think—not much,’ Hannah replied, after slight

hesitation, and trying to be as truthful as she could. 'When first I came here I was doubtful how our plan would answer; but it has answered admirably. I desire no change. I am only too happy in my present life.'

'Perfectly happy? Are you quite sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'Then I suppose I ought to be.'

Yet he sighed, and very soon after he rose with some excuse about a sermon he had to look over; went into his study, whence, contrary to his custom, he did not emerge for the rest of the evening.

Hannah sat alone, and rather uncomfortable. Had she vexed him in any way? Was he not glad she declared herself happy, since, of necessity, his kindness helped to make her so? For months now there had never come a cloud between them. Their first quarrel was also their last. By this time they had, of course, grown perfectly used to one another's ways; their life flowed on in its even course—a pleasant river, busy as it was smooth. Upon its surface floated peacefully that happy, childish life, developing into more beauty every day. Rosie was not exactly a baby now; and often when she trotted along the broad garden walk, holding tightly papa's hand on one side and auntie's on the other, there came into Hannah's mind that lovely picture of Tennyson's:—

'And in their double love secure  
The little maiden walked demure,  
Pacing with downward eyelids pure.'

That was the picture which she saw in a vision, and had referred to—why had it vexed the father? Did he think she 'spoiled' Rosie? But love never spoils any child, and Aunt Hannah could be stern, too, if necessary. She made as few laws as possible; but those she did make were irrevocable, and Rosie knew this already. She never cried for a thing twice over—



and oh how touching was her trust, how patient her resigning!

‘I don’t know how far you will educate your little niece,’ wrote Lady Dunsmore, in the early days of Hannah’s willing task; ‘but I am quite certain she will educate you.’

So she did; and Hannah continually watched in wonder the little new-born soul, growing as fast as the body, and spreading out its wings daily in farther and fairer flights, learning, she knew not how, more things than she had taught it, or could teach.

Then Rosie comforted her aunt so—with the same sweet, dumb comfort that Hannah used to get from flowers and birds and trees. But here was a living flower, which God had given her to train up into beauty, blessing her with twice the blessedness she gave. In all her little household worries, Rosie’s unconscious and perpetual well-spring of happiness soothed Hannah indescribably, and never more so than in some bitter days which followed that day, when Mr. Rivers seemed to have suddenly returned to his old miserable self, and to be dissatisfied with everything and everybody.

Even herself. She could not guess why; but sometimes her brother-in-law actually scolded her, or, what was worse, he scolded Rosie; quite needlessly, for the child was an exceedingly good child. And then Aunt Hannah’s indignation was roused. More than once she thought of giving him a severe lecture, as she had occasionally done before, and he declared it did him good. But a certain diffidence restrained her. What right indeed had she to ‘pitch into him,’ as he had laughingly called it, when they were no blood relations?—if blood gives the right of fault-finding, which some people suppose. Good friends as she and Mr. Rivers were, Hannah scrupled to claim more than the rights of friendship, which scarcely justify a lady in saying to a gentleman in his own house, ‘You are growing a

perfect bear, and I would much rather have your room than your company.'

Which was the truth. Just now, if she had not had Rosie's nursery to take refuge in, and Rosie's little bosom to fly to, burying her head there oftentimes, and drying her wet eyes upon the baby-pinafore, Aunt Hannah would have had a sore time of it.

And yet she was so sorry for him—so sorry! If the old cloud were permanently to return, what should she do? What possible influence had she over him? She was neither his mother nor sister, if indeed either of those ties permanently affect a man who has once been married, and known the closest sympathy, the strongest influence a man can know. Many a time, when he was very disagreeable, her heart sank down like lead; she would carry Rosie sorrowfully out of papa's way, lest she should vex him, or be made naughty by him; conscious as she clasped the child to her bosom, of that dangerous feeling which men sometimes rouse in women—even fathers in mothers—that their children are much pleasanter company than themselves.

Poor Bernard! poor Hannah! Perhaps the former should have been wiser, the latter more quick sighted. But men are not always Solons; and Hannah was a rather peculiar sort of woman. She had so completely taken her own measure and settled her voluntary destiny, that it never occurred to her she was not quite the old maid she thought herself, or that, like other mortal creatures, her lot, as well as her individuality, was liable to be modified by circumstances. When Bernard once told her she was a well-liked person, growing very popular at Easterham, she smiled, rather pleased than not; but when he hinted that an elderly rector, a rich widower, who had lately taken to visiting constantly at the House on the Hill, did not visit there on his account, but hers, Miss Thelluson at first looked innocently uncomprehending, then annoyed, as if her

brother-in-law had made an unseemly jest. He never made it again. And soon afterwards, either from her extreme coldness of manner, or some other cause, the rector suddenly vanished, and was no more seen.

Presently, and just at the time when she would have been most glad of visitors to cheer up her brother-in-law, their house seemed to grow strangely empty. Invitations ceased, even those at the Moat-House being fewer and more formal. And in one of her rare visits there, Lady Rivers had much annoyed her by dragging in—apropos of Adeline's marriage, and the great advantage it was for girls to get early settled in life—a pointed allusion to the aforesaid rector, and his persistent attentions.

'Which of course everybody noticed, my dear. Everybody notices everything in Easterham. And allow me to say that if he does mean anything, you may count on my best wishes. Indeed, I think, all things considered, to marry him would be the best thing you could do.'

'Thank you; but I have not the slightest intention of doing it.'

'Then, do you never mean to marry at all?'

'Probably not,' replied Hannah, trying hard to keep up that air of smiling politeness, which she had hitherto found as repellent as a crystal wall against impertinent intrusiveness. 'But, really, these things cannot possibly interest any one but myself. Not even benevolent Easterham.'

'Pardon me. Benevolent Easterham is taking far too much interest in the matter, and in yourself too, I am sorry to say,' observed Lady Rivers, mysteriously. 'But, of course, it is no business of mine.'

And with a displeased look, the old lady disappeared to other guests, giving Hannah unmistakably 'the cold shoulder' for the remainder of the evening.

This did not afflict her much, for she was used to it. Of far greater consequence was it, when, a little

while after, she saw by Bernard's looks that his spirits had risen, and he was almost his old self again. It always pleased him when his sister-in-law was invited to the Moat-House, and made herself agreeable there, as she resolutely did. The habit of accepting a man's bread and salt, and then making oneself disagreeable in the eating of it, or abusing it afterwards, was a phase of fashionable morality not yet attained to by Miss Thelluson. She did not care to visit much: but when she did go out, she enjoyed herself as much as possible.

'Yes, it has been a very pleasant evening; quite lively—for the Moat-House,' she would have added, but checked herself. It was touching to see Bernard's innocent admiration of everything at the Moat-House. The only occasions when it vexed her was when they showed so little appreciation of him.

'Oh, why can he not always be as good as he is to-night!' thought Hannah, when, as they walked home together, which they did sometimes of fine evenings instead of ordering the carriage, he talked pleasantly and cheerfully the whole way. They passed through the silent, shut-up village, and up the equally silent hill-road, to the smooth 'down' at its top. There the extreme quietness and loneliness, and the mysterious beauty of the frosty starlight, seemed to soothe him into a more earnest mood, imparting something of the feeling which bright winter nights always gave to Hannah—that sense of nearness to the invisible, which levels all human griefs, and comforts all mortal pain.

'Perhaps, after all,' said he, when they had been speaking on this subject, 'it does not so very much matter whether one is happy or miserable during one's short life here; or one is inclined to feel so on a night like this, and talking together as you and I do now. The only thing of moment seems to be to have patience and do one's duty.'

‘I think it does matter,’ Hannah answered; but gently, so as not to frighten away the good angel which she rejoiced to see returning. ‘People do their duty much better when they are happy. I cannot imagine a God who could accept only the sacrifices of the miserable. We must all suffer, less or more; but I never would suffer one whit more, or longer, than I could help.’

‘Would you not?’

‘No; nor would I make others suffer. What do you think the child said to me yesterday, when I was removing her playthings at bed-time? I suppose I looked grave, for she said, ‘Poor Tannie! Isn’t Tannie sorry to take away Rosie’s toys?’ Tannie was sorry, and would gladly have given them all back again if she could. Don’t you think,’ and Hannah lifted her soft, grey, truthful eyes to the winter sky, ‘that if Tannie feels thus, so surely must God?’

Mr. Rivers said nothing; but he pressed slightly the arm within his, and they walked on, taking the ‘sweet counsel together,’ which is the best privilege of real friends. It was like old days come back again, and Hannah felt so glad.

‘Now you may perceive,’ Bernard said after a little, apropos of nothing, ‘why the charming young ladies who come about my sisters, and whom they think I don’t admire half enough, do not attract me as I suppose they ought to do. They might have done so once, before I had known sorrow; but now they seem to me so “young, shallow, and small.” One half of me—the deepest half—they never touch; nor do my own people neither. For instance, the things we have been talking of to-night I should never dream of speaking about to anybody—except you.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Hannah, gratified.

Had she thought herself bound to tell the full truth, she might have confessed that there was a time when she, on her part, thought Mr. Rivers as he

thought these girls, 'young, shallow, and small.' She did not now. Either he had altered very much, or she had much misjudged him. Probably both was the case. He had grown older, graver, more earnest. She did not feel the least like his mother now; he was often much wiser than she, and she gladly owned this. It would have relieved her honest mind to own likewise a few other trifles on which she had been egregiously mistaken. But in some things, and especially those which concerned herself and her own feelings, Hannah was still a very shy woman.

'Not that I have a word to say against those charming girls,' continued he, relapsing into his gay mood. 'No doubt they *are* very charming, the Miss Melvilles and the rest.

"He that loves a rosy cheek,  
And a coral lip admires,"

may find enough to admire in them. Only—only—you remember the last verse?' And he repeated it; with a tender intonation that rather surprised Hannah—

"But a true and constant mind  
Gentle thoughts and calm desires,  
Hearts in equal love combined,  
Kindle never-dying fires."

That is my theory of loving—is it yours?

'I should fancy it is most people's who have ever deeply thought about the matter.'

'Another theory I have, too,' he went on, apparently half in earnest, half in jest, 'that the passion comes to different people, and at different times of their lives, in very contrary ways. Some "fall" in love as I did, at first sight, with my lost darling,'—he paused, a full minute. 'Others walk into love deliberately, with their eyes open; while a few creep into it blindfold, and know not where they are going till the bandage drops, and then——'

‘And which of these do you suppose was the case of Adeline and Mr. Melville?’

‘Good heavens! I was not thinking of Adeline and Mr. Melville at all.’

He spoke with such needless acerbity that Hannah actually laughed, and then begged his pardon, which seemed to offend him only the more. She did not know how to take him, his moods were so various and unaccountable. But whatever they were, or whatever he was, she felt bound to put up with him; nay, she was happier with him in any mood than when far apart from him, as when he had held himself aloof from her of late.

‘You are very cross to me,’ said she simply, ‘but I do not mind it. I know you have many things to vex you, only do please try to be as good as you can. And you might as well as not be good to me.’

‘Be good to you!’

‘Yes; for though I may vex you sometimes as I seem to have done lately, I do not really mean any harm.’

‘Harm! Poor Hannah! Why, you wouldn’t harm a fly. And yet——’ he stopped suddenly, took both her hands, and looked her hard in the face, ‘there are times when I feel as if I hated the very sight of you.’

Hannah stood aghast. Such unkind, causelessly unkind words! Hate her—why? Because she reminded him of his wife! And yet, except for a certain occasional ‘family’ look, no two sisters could be more unlike than she and Rosa. Even were it not so, what a silly, nay, cruel reason for disliking her! And why had not the dislike shown itself months ago, when he seemed to prize her all the more for belonging to the departed one, whom he still fondly called his ‘lost darling.’

Miss Thelluson could not understand it at all. She was first startled; then inexpressibly pained.

The tears came, and choked her. She would have run away if she could; but as she could not, she walked on, saying nothing, for she literally had not a word to say.

Mr. Rivers walked after her. 'I beg your pardon. I have spoken wildly, ridiculously. You must forgive. You see, I am not such a calm, even temperament as you. Oh, Hannah, do forgive me. I did not mean what I said—I did not indeed!'

'What did you mean then?'

A question which some people, well versed in the science which Mr. Rivers had just been so eloquently discussing, may consider foolish in the extreme, showing Hannah to have been, not merely the least self-conscious, but the most purblind of her sex. She was neither. But there are natures so exceedingly single-minded and straightforward, that what seems to them not a right or fitting thing to be done, they no more think of doing themselves, or of suspecting others of doing, than of performing that celebrated feat of 'jumping over the moon.' Besides, her idea of herself was, in many ways, as purely imaginary as her idea of her brother-in-law. The known, notable fact, that 'hate' is often only the agonised expression of a very opposite feeling, never once suggested itself to the innocent mind of Hannah Thelluson.

They had by this time reached their own gate. Her hand was on the latch, not reluctantly. He took it off.

'Don't go in—not just this moment, when you are displeased with me. The night is so fine, and there is nobody about.' (What would that matter? Hannah thought.) 'Just walk a few steps farther, while I say to you something which I have had on my mind to say for weeks past:—a message, no, not a message, but a sort of commission from a friend of mine.'

By his hesitation, his extreme awkwardness and



incomfortableness of manner, Hannah guessed directly what it was. 'Et tu, Brute!' she could have bitterly said, remembering the annoyance to which she had been just subjected by Lady Rivers; whom she had seen afterwards in close conclave with Bernard. Had he, then, been enlisted on the same side—of the obnoxious rector? Well, what matter? She had better hear all, and have done with it.

But there was delay, and for fully ten minutes; first by Bernard's silence, out of which she was determined not to help him in the least; and secondly, by their encountering a couple out walking like themselves, the village apothecary and the village milliner,—known well to be lovers,—who looked equally shy at being met by, and astonished at meeting, their clergyman and his sister-in-law out on the hill at that late hour. Mr. Rivers himself looked much vexed, and hastily proposed turning homeward, as if forgetting altogether what he had to say, till they once more reached the gate.

'Just one turn in the garden, Hannah—I must deliver my message, and do my duty, as Lady Rivers says I ought. I beg your pardon,' he added formally, 'it is trenching on delicate ground, but my friend, Mr. Morecamb, has asked me confidentially to tell him whether you have any objection to his visiting our house.'

'Our house? Certainly not.'

'But the house means you,—visits paid to you, with a certain definite end,—in plain terms, he wishes to marry you.'

'And has confided that intention to you, and to all Easterham! How very kind! But would it not have been kinder to put the question to me himself, instead of making it public through a third party?'

'If by the "third party" you mean me, I assure you, I was no willing party; and also, that I have sedulously kept the secret forced upon me. Even

to-night, when Lady Rivers was questioning me on the subject, I was careful not to let her suspect, in the smallest degree, that there was any foundation for the report beyond Easterham gossip at Morecamb's frequent visits. I kept my own counsel, ay, and submitted to be rated roundly for my indifference to your interests, and told that I was hindering you from making a good marriage. Is it so?'

'You ought to have known me better than to suppose I should ever make a "good" marriage; which means, in Lady Rivers's vocabulary, a marriage of convenience. She is very kind, to take my affairs so completely into her own hands. I am deeply indebted to her—and to you.'

The tone was so bitter and satirical, so unlike herself, that Bernard turned to look at her in the starlight,—the pale pure face, neither young nor old, which, he sometimes said, never would be either younger or older, because no wear and tear of human passion troubled its celestial peace.

'I have offended you, I see. Can it be possible that ——'

'Nothing is impossible, apparently. But I should have supposed that you yourself would have been the first to put down all remarks of this kind; aware that it was, at least, highly improbable I could have any feeling concerning Mr. Morecamb—unless it was resentment at his having made me a public talk in this way.'

'He could not help it, I suppose.'

'He ought to have helped it. Any man who really loves a woman will hide her under a bushel, so to speak,—shelter her from the faintest breath of gossip, take any trouble, any blame even, upon himself, rather than let her be talked about. At least, that is how I should feel if I were a man and loved a woman. But I don't understand you men—less and less the more I know of you. You seem to see

things in a different light, and live after a different pattern, from what we women do.'

'That is only too true,—the more the pity,' said Mr. Rivers, sighing. 'But as to gossip: the man might not be able to prevent it. There might be circumstances——What do you think Morecamb ought to have done?'

Hannah thought a moment. 'He should have held his tongue till he knew his own mind fully, or guessed mine. Then he should have put the question to me direct, and I would have answered it the same, and also held my tongue. Half the love-miseries in the world arise, not from the love itself, but from people's talking about it. I say to all my young friends who fall in love, whether happily or unhappily,—“Keep it to yourself: whatever happens, hold your tongue.”'

'Oracular advice—as if from a prophetess superior to all these human weaknesses,' said Bernard bitterly. 'A pity it was not given in time to poor Mr. Morecamb. What do you dislike in him—his age?'

'No; it is generally a good thing for the man to be older than the woman—even much older.'

'His being a widower, then?'

'Not at all; but—' and Hannah stopped, as indignant as if she had really loved Mr. Morecamb. That her brother-in-law should be pleading the cause of a gentleman who wanted to marry her, or that any gentleman should be wanting to marry her, seemed equally extraordinary. She could have laughed at the whole matter, had she not felt so strangely, absurdly angry. She stood—twirling her hands in and out of her muff, and patting with fierce little feet the frosty ground, and waited for Mr. Rivers to speak next. He did so at length, very formally.

'I have, then, to convey to my friend a simple negative, and say that you desire his visits here to cease?'

‘Not if he is your friend, and you wish them to continue. What right have I to shut the door upon any of your guests? My position is most awkward, most uncomfortable. Why did not you spare me this? If you had tried, I think—I think you might.’

It was a woman’s involuntary outcry of pain, and appeal for protection—until she remembered she was making it to a sham protector; a man who had no legal rights towards her; who was neither husband, father, nor brother; who, though she was living under his roof, could not shelter her in the smallest degree, except as an ordinary friend. He was that anyhow, for he burst out in earnest and passionate rejoinder.

‘How could I have spared you—only tell me! You talk of rights—what right had I to prevent the man’s seeking you—to stand in the way of your marrying, as they tell me I do? Oh, Hannah! if you knew what misapprehension, what blame, I have subjected myself to, in all these weeks of silence. And yet now you—even you—turn round and accuse me.’

‘I accuse you!’

‘Well, well, perhaps we are taking a too tragical view of the whole matter. You do not quite hate me?’

‘No; on the contrary, it was you who said you hated me.’

And that sudden change from pathos to bathos, from the sublime to the ridiculous, which, in talk, constantly takes place between people who are very familiar with one another, came now to soothe the agitation of both.

‘Let us make a paction, for it will never do to have another quarrel, or even a coolness,’ said Mr. Rivers, with that bright, pleasant manner of his, which always warmed Hannah through and through like sunshine; she whose life, before she came to

Easterham, had been, if placid, a little sunless, cold, and pale. 'I know, whenever you tap your foot in that way, it is a sign you are waxing wrath. Presently you will burst out, and tear me limb from limb, as—allegorically speaking—you delight to do, you being a "big lion," as Rosie says, and I as innocent as a lamb the whole time.'

Hannah laughed, and 'got down from her high horse,' as he used to call it, immediately. She always did when he appealed to her in that irresistibly winning, good-humoured way. It is one of the greatest of mysteries—the influence one human being has over another. Oftener than not, because of extreme dissimilarity. Upon Hannah's grave and silent nature, the very youthfulness, buoyantness, and frankness of this young man came with a charm and freshness which she never found in grave, silent, middle-aged people. Even his face, which she had once called too handsome—uninterestingly handsome,—she had come to look at with a tender pride—as his mother (so she said to herself at least) might have done.

'Well, papa,' she replied, 'I don't know whether you are a lamb or a lion, but you are without doubt the sweetest-tempered man I ever knew. It is a blessing to live with you, as Rosa once said.'

'Did she say that? poor darling! And—and do you think it? Oh, Hannah!' and he lifted up in the starlight a suddenly grave, even solemn, face; 'if you knew everything—if she were looking at us two here—would she not say—I am sure she would——'

But the sentence was never ended; for just as they stood at the hall door, a scream resounded from within—an unmistakable woman's scream.

'That is Grace's voice. Oh, my baby, my baby!' cried Hannah, and darted away, Mr. Rivers following her.

## CHAPTER VII.

No harm had befallen baby. Hannah, flying up-stairs on terror-winged feet, that carried her she hardly knew how, found her treasure all safe, lying fast asleep, as warm and soft as a little bird in its nest, in the quiet nursery.

Grace was not there, and yet it was certainly Grace's voice she had heard. What could have happened? The uneasy fear that some time or other something uncomfortable might turn up concerning Jem Dixon was seldom long absent from Hannah's mind, though it was not strong enough to take away the comfort she had in her intelligent and faithful nurse.

Of course the whole household, as well as every household at Easterham, knew Grace's story. In such a small community concealment was impossible, even had Miss Thelluson wished it, which she did not. She had a great horror of secrets, and besides she felt that in this painful matter perfect openness was the safest course. Therefore, both to her servants and her neighbours, she had never hesitated to mention the thing, telling the plain story, accepting it as an inevitable misfortune, and then protecting Grace to the utmost by her influence—the influence which any lady can use, both with equals and inferiors, when she is, like Hannah, quite firm in her own mind, and equally fearless in expressing it. Whatever people said behind her back, before Hannah's face nobody breathed a word against the poor nurse, who cowered gratefully under the shelter of her mistress's kindness, and kept out of other people's way as much as possible.

In her class broken hearts are rare; working women have not time to die of grief. But though Grace

said little or nothing, often when she sat sewing, with Rosie playing at her feet, Hannah watched with pity the poor sad face, and thought of the blighted life which nothing could ever restore. For, as has been said, Grace, brought up as little maid to the Miss Melvilles, had caught from them a higher tone of feeling, and a purer morality, in great things and small, than, alas! is usually found among servants; and she suffered accordingly. Her shame, if shame it could be called, seemed to gnaw into her very heart. So did her separation from the children. How far she grieved for their father could not be guessed; she never named him, and, Hannah was certain, saw and heard nothing of him. But that scream, and a slight confusion which was audible down-stairs, convinced her that something—probably the vague something she always feared—had happened; James Dixon had re-appeared.

She went down-stairs and found it so. In the servants' hall, the centre of an excited group—some frightened at him, some making game of him—stood a little, ugly-looking man, half-drunk, but not too drunk to be incapable of taking care of himself, or knowing quite well what he was about. He held Grace tight round the waist with one hand, and brandished a kitchen carving-knife with the other, daring everybody to come near him;—which nobody did, until Mr. Rivers walked quietly up and took the knife out of his hand.

'James Dixon, what business have you in my house at this time of night?'

'I want my missis. I'm come to fetch my missis,' stammered the man drunkenly, still keeping hold of Grace in spite of her violent struggles to get free.

'*She* isn't his missis,' cried some one from behind. 'Please, sir, he married my cousin, Ann Bridges, only two months ago. He's always a-marrying somebody.'

'But I don't like Ann Bridges now I've got her. She's for ever rating at me and beating the children;

and I'm a fond father as doesn't like to see his little 'uns ill-used,' added Jem, growing maudlin. 'So I'd rather get rid of Ann and take Grace back again.'

When he spoke of the children, Grace had given a great sob; but now, when he turned to her his red, drunken face and wanted to kiss her, she shrank from him in disgust, and making one struggle wrenched herself free, and darted over to Mr. Rivers.

'Oh, please save me! I don't want to go back to him. I can't, sir, you know.' And then she appealed despairingly to her mistress. 'Did you hear what he said? That woman beats the children; I knew she would; and yet I can't go back. Miss Thelluson, you don't think I ought to go back?'

'Certainly not,' said Hannah, and then her brother-in-law first noticed her presence.

'Pray go away,' he whispered, 'this is not a place for you. See, the man is drunk.'

'I do not mind,' she answered. 'Just look at poor Grace; we must save her from him.'

For Jem had again caught the young woman in his arms, where she lay, half-fainting, not resisting at all, evidently frightened to death.

'This cannot be endured,' said Mr. Rivers angrily. 'Dixon, be off with you! Webb, Jacob, take him between you and see him clear out of the gate.'

'Butler and footman advanced, but their task was not easy. Dixon was a wiry little fellow, sharp as a ferret, even in his cups. He wriggled out of the men's grasp immediately, and tried again to snatch at the kitchen-knife.

'Hands off, mates; I'll go fast enough. It isn't much a fellow gets in this house. Grace wouldn't even give me a drop o' beer. I'll be off, Mr. Rivers; but I'll not stir a step without my wife, that's the young woman there. I married her in church, same as I did t'other woman, and I like her the best o' the two; so do the little ones. I promised them I'd fetch



her back. You'll come, Grace, won't you? and I'll be so kind to you.'

'Oh, Jem, Jem!' sobbed poor Grace, melted by the coaxing tone; but still she tried to get away, and cried imploringly to her master to release her from Dixon's hold. Mr. Rivers grew angry.

'Let the woman go, I say. You have not the smallest claim upon her, no more than she upon you. If she chooses to stay here she shall. Begone, before I set the police on you!'

'Do it if you dare, sir,' said Dixon, setting his back against the door. 'I'll not stir a step without Grace; she's a pretty girl, and a nice girl, and I married her in church, too. I found a parson to do it, though you wouldn't.'

'Your marriage is worth nothing; I told you so at the time. It was against the law, and the law does not recognise it. She is not your wife, and so, very rightly, she refuses to go back to you, and I, as magistrate, will protect her in this refusal. Let her go.' And Mr. Rivers, following words by action, again shook off the fellow's grasp and left the young woman free. 'Now, Grace, get away up-stairs, and let us put an end to this nonsense.'

For, in spite of their respect for their master, the other servants seemed rather amused than not at this spectacle of a gentleman arguing with a drunken man for the possession of his wife; or, perhaps, some of them having as confused notions of the marriage laws as James Dixon, had thought Jem was rather hardly used, and ought to get Grace if he wanted. The butler, an old servant, even ventured to hint this, and that it was a pity to meddle between man and wife.

'Did I not say plainly that she is not his wife?' cried Mr. Rivers in much displeasure. 'A man cannot marry his wife's sister. I am master here, and out of my house she shall not stir against her will. Grace, go up-stairs immediately with Miss Thelluson.'

Then Dixon's lingering civility and respect for the clergy quite left him. He squared up at Mr. Rivers in drunken rage.

'You're a nice parson, you are. Mind your own business and I'll mind mine. Your own hands bean't so very clean, I reckon. Some folk 'ud say mine were the cleanest o' the two.'

'What do you mean, you scoundrel? Speak out, or I'll take you by the neck and shake you like a rat.'

For Mr. Rivers was a young man, and his passions were up; and Dixon looked so very like a rat, with his glittering, hungry eyes, and a creeping way he had till he showed his teeth and sprung upon you. Hannah wondered how on earth poor, pretty Grace could ever have been persuaded to marry him. But no doubt it was like so many marriages, the mere result of circumstances, and for the sake of the children. 'If ever I could marry that man, it would be for the sake of his children,' said once a very good woman; and though men are probably too vain to believe it, many another good woman may have felt the same.

'What do I mean, sir?' said Dixon, with a laugh; 'oh, you knows well enough what I mean, and so do your servants there, and so does all Easterham. There bean't much to choose betwixt you and me, Mr. Rivers, if all tales be true.'

'What tales?' said Bernard slowly, turning white, though he still held his ground and deliberately faced the man. For all his servants were facing him, and on more than one countenance was a horrid kind of smile, the smile with which, in these modern days, when the old feudal reverence seems so mournfully wearing off, the kitchen often views the iniquities of the parlour. 'What tales?'

'Of course it isn't true, sir—or else it doesn't matter—gentlefolks may do anything they likes. But people do say, Mr. Rivers, that you and I row in the

same boat: only I was honest enough to marry my wife's sister, and you — wasn't. That's all!

It was enough. Brief as the accusation was put, there was no mistaking it, or Dixon's meaning in it. Either Mr. Rivers had not believed the man's insolence would go so far, or was unaware of the extent to which the scandal had grown, but he stood, for a moment, perfectly paralysed. He neither looked to one side nor the other—to Hannah, who had scarcely taken it in, or to the servants, who had taken it in only too plainly. Twice he opened his lips to speak, and twice his voice failed. At last he said, in a voice so hollow and so unlike his own that everybody started—

'It is a lie! I declare, before God and all now present, that what this man says against me is a foul, damnable lie!'

He uttered the ugly words as strongly and solemnly as he was accustomed to read such out of the Bible in his pulpit at church. They sent a thrill through every listener, and sobered even the drunken man. But Jem soon saw his advantage, and took it.

'Lie or not, sir, it looks just the same, and folks believe it all the same. When a poor man takes a young woman into his house, and either marries her or wants to, what an awful row you kick up about it! But when a gentleman does it—oh, dear! it's quite another thing!'

Mr. Rivers ground his teeth together, but still no words came except the repetition of those four, 'It is a lie!'

'Well, if it is, sir, it looks uncommon queer, anyhow. For a young lady and a young gentleman to live together, and be a-going out and a-coming home together; and when we meets 'em, as I did a bit ago, not exactly a-going straight home, but a-walking and a-whispering together in the dark—'twas them, sure, for the lady had got a red hood on, and she's got it on still.'

Hannah put her hand up to her head. Until this moment, confused and bewildered, and full of pity for unfortunate Grace, she had scarcely understood the scandal with regard to herself. Now she did. Plain as light—or, rather, black as darkness—she saw all that she was accused of, all that she had innocently laid herself open to, and from which she must at once defend herself. How?

It was horrible! To stand there and hear her good name taken away before her own servants, and with her brother-in-law close by! She cast a wild appealing look to him, as if he could protect her; but he took no notice—scarcely seemed to see her. Grace only—poor, miserable Grace—stole up to her and caught her hand.

‘It is a lie, miss—and Jem knows it is! You mustn’t mind what he says.’

And then another of the women servants—an under-housemaid to whom she had been specially kind—ran across to her, beginning to cry. Oh, the humiliation of those tears!

Somebody must speak. This dreadful scene must be ended.

‘Sister Hannah,’ said Mr. Rivers, at length recovering himself, and speaking in his natural manner, but with grave and pointed respect, ‘will you oblige me by taking Grace up-stairs? Webb and Jacob, remove this fellow from my house immediately; or else, as I said, we must fetch the police.’

Mr. Rivers had great influence when he chose to exercise it, especially with his inferiors. His extraordinarily sweet temper, his tender consideration for other people’s feelings, his habit of putting himself in their place—the lowest and most degraded of them, and judging them mercifully, as the purest-hearted always do judge—these things stood him in good stead both in his household and his parish. Besides when a mild man once gets thoroughly angry, people know he means it, and are frightened accordingly.

Either Dixon felt some slight remorse, or dreaded the police, but he suffered himself to be conveyed quietly outside, and the gate locked upon him, without making more ado than a few harmless pullings of the garden bell. These at last subsided, and the household became quiet.

Quiet, after such a scene! As if it were possible! Retiring was a mere form. The servants sat up till midnight, gossiping gloriously over the kitchen fire. Hannah heard them where she, too, sat, wide awake, in the dreadful silence and solitude of her own room.

She had gone up-stairs with Grace, as bidden; and they had separated, without exchanging a word, at the nursery door. For the first time in her life Hannah went to bed without taking one watchful, comforting look, one kiss of her sleeping darling. She went to bed in a mechanical, stunned way; for though it was still quite early, she never thought of rejoining her brother-in-law. She heard him moving up and down the house for an hour or more, even after that cruel clamour of tongues in the kitchen was silent; but to meet him again that night never struck her as a possibility. What help, what comfort, could he be to her?—he who was joined with her in this infamous slander? Henceforth, instead of coming to him for protection, she must avoid him as she would the plague.

‘Oh, what have I done, and how have I erred, that all this misery should fall upon me?’ moaned poor Hannah, as bit by bit she realised her position—the misinterpretations that might be put upon her daily conduct, even as upon to-night’s walk across the hill. Perhaps what Dixon said was true—that all Easterham was watching her and speaking evil of her? Was this the meaning of Lady Rivers’s dark hints—of the eager desire to get her married to Mr. Morecamb—of the falling-off of late in social civilities—a certain polite coldness in houses where her visits

used to be welcomed—a gradual cessation of lady visitors at the House on the Hill? As all these facts came back upon her mind, fitting into one another, as unpleasant facts do, when one once fancies one has got the key to them, Hannah groaned aloud, feeling as if she could lay her down and die. It had all come so suddenly. She had gone on her way in such happy unsuspectingness. Yes! now she recognised with mingled wonder and—was it terror also?—how very happy she had been. There seemed nothing left for her but to lay her down and die.

Everybody knows the story of the servant lamenting his master's dying innocent, to whom the master said, 'Would you have me die guilty?' Nevertheless, it is hard to die, even when innocent. No bitterer hour ever came to Hannah, or was likely to come, than that first hour after a bad man's wicked words had forced from Mr. Rivers the declaration—which, in itself, and in his ever feeling it incumbent upon himself to make it, was disgrace enough—'It is a lie!'

Of course it was; and any friend who really knew them both would be sure of that. But what of the world at large—the careless world, that judges from hearsay—the evil world, which is always so quick to discover, so ready to gloat over, anything wrong? And there must be something wrong, some false position, some oversight in conduct, some unfortunate concatenation of circumstances, to make such a lie possible.

'Be thou chaste as ice, pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.' Most true; but the calumny is rarely altogether baseless—some careless, passing hand may have smutched the snow, or the ice have let itself be carried too near the fire. Hannah remembered now, wondering she could have forgotten it so long, Lady Dunsmore's warning: 'He is not your brother; it is only a social fiction that makes him so.' And if Bernard Rivers and she were not brother and sister,

if there was no tie of blood between them, nothing that, if he had not been Rosa's husband first, would have prevented their marrying—why, then, she ought not to have gone and lived with him. The chain of argument seemed so plain, that in thinking it out Hannah suddenly began to tremble—nay, she actually shuddered; but, strange contradiction! it was not altogether a shudder of pain.

Fictions, social and otherwise, may have their day, when both the simple and the cunning accept them. But it is not a day which lasts for ever. By-and-by they tumble down, like all other shams; and the poor heart who had dwelt in them is cast out, bare and shelterless, to face the bitter truth as best it may.

Hannah's was the most innocent heart possible—strangely so for a woman who had lived, not ignorantly, in the world for thirty years. Whatever mistake she had fallen into—under whatever delusion she had wrapped herself—it was all done as unknowingly, as foolishly, as if she had been a seven-years' old child. But that did not hinder her from suffering like a woman—a woman who, after a long dream of peace, wakes up to find she has been sleeping on the edge of a precipice.

That pleasant fiction which had been torn down by the rough hands of James Dixon, opened her eyes to its corresponding truth, that nature herself sets bounds to the association of men and women—certainly of young men and young women—and that, save under very exceptional circumstances, all pseudo-relationships are a mistake. Two people, who are neither akin by blood nor bound in wedlock, can seldom, almost never, live together in close and affectionate friendship without this friendship growing to be something less or something more. The thing is abnormal, and against nature; and nature avenges herself by asserting her rights and exacting her punishments.

The law says to people in such positions — to brothers and sisters-in-law especially — ‘You shall not marry.’ But it cannot say, ‘You shall not love.’ It cannot prevent the gradual growth of that fond, intimate affection which is the surest basis of married happiness. Suppose — Hannah put the question to herself with frightened conscience — suppose, instead of that tender friendship which undoubtedly existed between them, she and Bernard had really fallen in love with one another?

That he was very fond of her, in a sort of way, she never doubted. That she was fond of him — yes, that also was true. She could not help it. He was so good; he made her so happy. Many a man is deeply attached to a woman — wife or sister — whom he yet entirely fails in making happy. He thinks too much of himself, too little of her. But Bernard was a different kind of man. That sweet sunshininess of nature, that generous self-forgetfulness, that constant protecting tenderness — more demonstrative in deeds than words — qualities so rare in men, and so precious when found, were his to perfection. He was not brilliantly clever; and he had many little faults; rashnesses, bursts of wrath, sudden, childish, fantastic humours, followed by pathetic contrition; but he was intensely lovable. Hannah had told him truly when she said — oh, how hot she grew when she recalled it! — ‘that it was a blessing to live with him,’ for everybody whom he lived with he contrived to make happy.

‘Oh, we have been so happy together,’ Rosa had sighed, almost with her last breath. And Rosa’s sister, in the bitter pang which seemed like death — for it must surely result in a parting as complete — could have said the same.

Yes, of course she must go away. There seemed to her at first no other alternative. She must quit the House on the Hill the very next day. This, not



alone for her own sake. It was, as Bernard had once said, truly a house on a hill, exposed to every comment, a beacon and example to every eye. No cloud of suspicion must be suffered to rest upon it—not for a day, an hour. She would run away at once.

And yet, was that the act of innocence—did it look like innocence? Was it not much more like the impulse of cowardly guilt? And if she did go, could she take Rosie with her?

Then, poor Hannah at once fell prone, crushed by a weight of misery greater than she could bear. To go away and leave her child behind! All Easterham might be howling at her, but she could never do that. Life without Rosie—the old, blank, sunless, childless life—she could not endure it. It would kill her at once. Better a thousand times stay on here, strong in her innocence, and let Easterham do and say its worst. For she had done no wrong, and, come what would, she had been happy. This sense of happiness, never stronger than a few hours ago, when she and Bernard were taking together that innocent-guilty walk and finding out more than ever the deep, true harmony of soul, which, in spite of their great differences of character, existed between them, seemed to wrap her up, close and warm, her only shelter against the bitter outside blast.

What would her brother-in-law say? She could not act for herself alone; the position was as cruel for him as for her. She must think of him too, and wait for his opinion, whatever it might be. And then she became conscious how completely she had learned to look to Bernard's opinion, to lean upon his judgment, to consult his tastes, to make him, in short, for these many months, what no man who is neither her relative nor her lover ought to be to any woman—the one primary object of her life.

Utterly bewildered, half-frightened, and unable to come to the slightest conclusion, Hannah, after lying

awake half the night, fell heavily asleep, nor wakened till the sound of little feet in her room, and the shrill, joyous cry—as sweet as the song of a lark springing up into the morning air over a clover field—‘Tannie, Tannie! Wake up, Tannie!’ dispersed in a moment all the cloudy despairs of the night.

Tennyson knew human nature well when he made the rejected lover say,—

‘My latest rival brings thee rest:

Baby fingers, waxen touches, press me from the mother’s breast.’

That is, they press out every image unholy, or painful, or despairing. Such cannot long exist in any heart that is filled with a child. Hannah had sometimes read in novels of women who were mothers falling in love, and with other men than their own husbands; kissing their babies in their innocent cradles, and then flying from lawful homes to homes unlawful. All these stories seemed to her then very dreadful, very tragical, but not quite impossible. Now, since she had had Rosie, they almost did seem impossible. How a woman once blessed with a child could ever think of any man alive, she could not comprehend.

Hannah had not held her little niece beside her for five minutes—feasting her eyes on the loving, merry face, and playing all the funny little games which Rosie and Tannie were so grand at when together—before all the agony of last night became as unreal as last night’s dreams. This was the real thing—the young life entrusted to her care—the young soul growing up under the shelter of her love. She rose and dressed for breakfast, feeling that with the child in her arms she could face the whole world.

Ay, her brother-in-law included; though this was a hard thing. She would not have been a woman not to have found it hard. And if he decided that

she must stay—that, strong in their innocence, they must treat Dixon's malicious insolence as mere insolence, no more, and make no change whatever in their way of life—still, how doubly difficult that life would be! To meet day after day at table and fireside; to endure, not in cheerful ignorance, but painful consciousness, the stare of all suspicious eyes, especially of their own household, who had heard them so wickedly accused, and seen—they must have seen!—how deep the wound had gone. It would be dreadful—almost unbearable.

And then—with regard to their two selves!

Bernard was—Hannah knew it, felt it—one of the purest-hearted of men. Living in the house with him was like living with a woman; nay, not all women had his delicacy of feeling. Frank and familiar as his manner was—or had been till lately—he never was free with her—never caressed her; nothing but the ordinary shake of the hand had ever passed between them, even though he was her brother-in-law. Hannah liked this reserve; she was not used to kissing; as people in large families are, as the Moat-House girls were; it had rather surprised her to see the way they all hung about young Mr. Melville. But, even though in their daily conduct to one another, private and public, she and Bernard could never be impeached, still the horrible possibility of being watched—watched and suspected—and that both knew it was so, was enough to make the relations between them so painful, that she hardly knew how she should bear it.

Even this morning her feet lingered on the stair, and that bright breakfast-room, with its pleasant morning greeting, seemed a sort of purgatory that she would have escaped if she could.

She did escape it, for it was empty of everybody but Webb, the butler, whom she saw hovering about; near, suspiciously near, to an open note, or rather a

scrap of paper, left on the table, open—was it intentionally open?—for anybody's perusal?

'Master has just gone off to the railway in the dog-cart, Miss Thelluson. He left this bit of paper, with an apology to you; saying he was in a great hurry, and hadn't time to write more, or he would miss the London train.'

'He has gone to London?' said Hannah, with a great sense of relief, and yet of pain.

'Yes, miss, I think so; but the note says——'

Then Webb *had* gratified his curiosity by reading the paper.

Anybody might have read it, certainly. It might have been printed in the *Times* newspaper, or declaimed by the Easterham town-crier for the benefit of the small public at the market-place. And yet Hannah's eyes read it eagerly, and her heart beat as she did so in a way that no sight of Bernard's familiar handwriting had ever made it beat before.

'DEAR SISTER HANNAH,

'I am away to town to visit a sick friend, and am obliged to start very early. I hope to be back by Sunday, but do not expect me till you see me. Give papa's love to his little Rosie, and believe me,

'Your affectionate brother,

'BERNARD RIVERS.

'Perhaps you will kindly call at the Moat-House to-day, and tell them I am gone.'

## CHAPTER VIII.

HANNAH's first feeling on discovering her brother-in-law's absence was intense relief. Then, as she sat over the solitary breakfast-table, there came unto her an uneasiness akin to fear. He had done exactly what she had not done; what, in spite of her first instinctive wish, she had decided was unwise and cowardly to do—he had run away.

From what? From the scandal? But since it was all false, and they innocent, what did it matter? Could they not live it down? Dreadful as things had appeared in the long watches of the night, in that clear light of morning, and with the touch of her darling's arms still lingering about her neck, Hannah felt that she could live it down. Perhaps he could not; perhaps he was afraid—and a cold shiver crept over her—a conviction that he was afraid.

In the sick friend she did not quite believe. She knew all Bernard's affairs—knew that though he had an old college companion ill in London, it was no friend close enough to take him suddenly and compulsorily from all his duties—he who so hated going from home. Yes, he must have gone on her account, and in consequence of what happened last night. Her first impulse of relief and gratitude sank into another sort of feeling. He had certainly run away, leaving her to fight the battle alone. That is, if he meant them to fight it out. If not, if he wished her to leave him, in his absence he would perhaps take the opportunity of telling her so.

For not yet—not even yet—did that other solution of the difficulty suggest itself to Hannah's mind. Had she looked at the sweet, grave face reflected in the mirror opposite, had she heard the patient, tender

voice which answered Rosie's infantile exactions—for she had gone and fetched the child, as usual, after breakfast—the truth would at once have occurred to her—concerning any other woman. But it did not concerning herself; or only in that form—a rather sad, but perfectly safe one—not that her brother-in-law was growing fond of her, but that she was growing fond of him; fond enough to make his marriage, or any other catastrophe which should part them, not so indifferent to her as it once had been.

But still this was only affection. Hannah had never had a brother, her nearest approach to the tie having been her cousin Arthur, who from his extreme gentleness and delicacy of health was less like a brother than a sister—ay, even after he changed into a lover. Now, when not one spark of passion, only sacred tenderness, was mixed up with the thought of him, his memory was less that of a man than an angel. In truth, only since she had lived with Mr. Rivers had Hannah found out what it was to associate with a real man, at once strong and tender, who put a woman in her right place by conscientiously taking his own with regard to her, and being to her at once a shelter and a shield.

Poor Hannah! she had grown so accustomed now to be taken care of, that she felt if fate thrust her out into the bitter world again, she should be as helpless as one of those little fledglings about whom, in the intervals of her meditations, she was telling Rosie a pathetic story. And when Rosie said, 'Poor 'ittle dicky-birds!' and looked quite sad, then, seeing Aunt Hannah looking sad too—alas! not about 'dicky-birds'—burst into the sympathetic sobbing of her innocent age, Aunt Hannah's heart felt like to break.

It would have broken many a time that day, but for the blessed necessity of keeping a bright face before the child. Ay, even though sometimes there occurred to her, with a refined self-torture, the

thought of what she should do if Mr. Rivers sent her away without Rosie. But she did not seriously fear this—he could not be capable of such cruelty. If he were—why, Aunt Hannah was quite capable of—something else which he might not exactly like, and which perhaps the unpleasant English law might call child-stealing. And she remembered a story, a true story, of an aunt who had once travelled from England to America, and there fairly kidnapped from some wicked relations her dead sister's child, pretended to take it out for a walk, and fled over snow and through forests, travelling by night and hiding by day, till she caught the New York steamer, and sailed, safe and triumphant, for English shores.

‘As I would sail, for Australia or America, any day, if he drives me to it. Oh, Rosie! you little know what a desperate woman Tannie could be made!’

And Rosie laughed in her face, and stroked it, and said, ‘Good Tannie, pretty Tannie!’ till the demon sank down, and the pure angel that always seems to look out of baby-eyes comforted Hannah in spite of herself. No one can be altogether wretched, for long together, who has the charge of a healthy, happy, loving little child.

Sunday came, but Mr. Rivers did not return; sending as substitute in his pulpit an old college chum, who reported that he had left London for Cambridge, and was staying there in his old college; at which Lady Rivers expressed herself much pleased.

‘He shuts himself up far too much at home, which would be natural enough if he had a wife; but for a man in Bernard’s circumstances is perfectly ridiculous. I hope he will now see his mistake, and correct it.’

Hannah answered nothing. She knew she was being talked at, as was the habit of the Moat-House. Her only protection was not to seem to hear. She had, as he desired, taken Bernard’s message to his family, even showing the letter, and another letter

she got from him respecting Mr. Hewlett the clergyman, also evidently meant to be shown. Indeed, he wrote almost daily to her about some parish business or other, for Hannah had become to him like her lost sister—his ‘curate in petticoats.’ But every letter was the briefest, most matter-of-fact possible, beginning ‘My dear sister,’ and ending ‘Your affectionate brother.’ Did he do this intentionally, or make the epistles public intentionally? She rather thought so. A wise, kind precaution; and yet there is something painful and aggravating in any friendship which requires precautions.

Day after day Hannah delivered her brother-in-law’s messages and transacted his business, speaking and looking as calmly as if she were his mere *locum tenens*, his faithful ‘curate,’ as if her throat were not choking and her hands trembling, with that horrible lie of Dixon’s ever present to her mind. She tried to find out whether it had ever reached others’ minds, whether there was any difference in the way people glanced at her or addressed her; but beyond a certain carelessness, with which she was usually treated at the Moat-House when Mr. Rivers was not present, and a slight coldness in other houses, which might or might not have been her own morbid fancy, she discovered nothing.

The clergyman sent by Bernard being of no imposing personality, or high worldly standing, but only just a poor ‘coach’ at Cambridge, was not invited to stay at the Moat-House; so Miss Thelluson had to entertain him herself till Monday. It was an easy task enough; he was very meek, very quiet, and very full of admiration of Mr. Rivers, concerning whose college life he told Hannah stories without end. She listened with an interest strangely warm and tender. For the tales were all to his credit, and proved him to have been then as now—a man who, even as a young man, was neither afraid of being good nor ashamed of



being amiable. They made her almost forgive herself for another fact which had alarmed and startled her—that she missed him so much.

People of Hannah's character, accustomed of sad necessity to stand alone, until self-dependent solitude becomes second nature, do not often 'miss' other people. They like their friends well enough, are glad to meet and sorry to part; but still no ordinary parting brings with it that intense sense of loss of which Hannah was painfully conscious now her brother-in-law was away. She had thought the child was enough company, and so Rosie was in daylight hours; the little imperious darling who ruled Aunt Hannah with a rod of iron, except when Aunt Hannah saw it was for the child's good to govern her, when she turned the tables with a firm gentleness that Rosie never disobeyed. But after Rosie had gone to bed, the blank silence which seemed to fall upon the house was indescribable.

Oh, the lonely tea-table!—for she had abolished seven-o'clock dinners; oh, the empty drawing-room, with its ghostly shadows and strange noises! The happy home felt as dreary as Bernard must have found it after poor Rosa died. In the long hours of evening solitude, Hannah's thoughts, beaten back by the never-ceasing business of the day, returned in battalions, attacking her on every weak side, often from totally opposite sides, so that she retired worsted to her inner self—the little secret chambers which her soul had dwelt in ever since she was a child! Yet even there was no peace now. Bernard had let himself into her heart, with that wonderful key of sympathy which he so well knew how to use, and even in her deepest and most sacred self she was entirely her own no more. Continually she wanted him—to talk to, to argue with, to laugh with, nay, even to laugh at sometimes. She missed him everywhere, in everything, with the bitter want of those who, having lived together for many

months, come inevitably, as was before said, either to dislike one another excessively, or—that other alternative which is sometimes the most fatal of the two—to love one another. Such love has a depth and passion to which common feelings can no more be compared than the rolling of a noisy brook to the solemn flow of a silent river, which bears life or death in its waveless but inexorable tide.

Ay, it was life or death. Call affection by what name you will, when it becomes all-absorbing it can, in the case of persons not akin by blood, lead but to one result, the love whose right end is marriage. When Hannah, as her brother-in-law's continued absence gave her more time for solitary reflection than she had had for many months, came face to face with the plain fact, how close they had grown, and how necessary they were to one another, she began, startled, to ask herself, if this so-called sisterly feeling were really sisterly? What if it were not? What if she had deceived herself, and that sweet, sad, morning dream which she had thought protected her from all other dreams of love and marriage, had been, after all, only a dream, and this the reality? Or would it have grown into such, had she and Bernard met as perfect strangers, free to fall in love and marry as strangers do?

'Suppose we had—suppose such a thing had been possible,' thought she. And then came a second thought. Why was it impossible? Who made it so—God or man?

Hannah had hitherto never fairly considered the matter, not even when Grace's misery brought it home. With her natural dislike to what she called 'walking through muddy water,' she had avoided it, as one does avoid any needlessly unpleasant thing. Now, when she felt herself turning hot and cold at every new idea which entered her mind, and beginning to think of her brother-in-law—not at all as

she was wont to think, the question came startlingly—was she right or wrong in so doing? For she was one of those women after the type of Jeanie in ‘Auld Robin Grey,’ to whom the mere fact—

‘I daurna think of Jamie, for that wad be a sin,’

was the beginning and end of everything.

But was it a sin? Could she find anything in the Bible to prove it such? She took down a ‘Concordance,’ and searched out all the texts which bore upon the subject, but found none, except that prohibition adduced once by Mrs. Dixon—‘Thou shalt not take a wife to her sister *in her lifetime*’—of which the straightforward, natural interpretation was that, consequently, it might be done after her death.

Right or wrong—thus, as Mr. Rivers had more than once half satirically told her, was, in all things, the sole question in Hannah’s mind. As for the social and legal point—lawful marriage—that she knew, was impossible; Bernard had said so himself. But was the love which desired marriage—absolute *love*, as distinguished from mere affection—also a sin? If it should spring up in her heart—of his she never thought—should she have to smother it down as a wicked thing?

That was her terror, and that alone. The rest, and whatever it must result in, was mere misery; and Hannah was not afraid of misery, only of sin. Yet, when day after day Bernard’s absence lengthened, and except these constant business letters she had no personal tidings whatever from him, there grew in her mind a kind of fear. The house felt so empty without him, that she sometimes caught herself wondering how he managed without her—who brought him his hat and gloves and arranged his daily memoranda—for, like many other excellent men, he was a little disorderly, and very dependent upon the women

about him. Who would take care of him and see that he had the food he liked, and the warm wraps he required? All these thoughts came continually back upon Hannah, in a piteously human, tender shape, quite different from that dim dream-love, that sainted remembrance of her lost Arthur. *He* was not a man, like Bernard, helpless even while helpful, requiring one woman's whole thought and care—he was an angel among the angels.

That power which every good man has to turn all his female ministrants into slaves, by being himself the very opposite of a tyrant; who can win from all household hearts the most loyal devotion, because exacting none—this, the best prerogative and truest test of real manhood, was Bernard's in a very great degree. It was, as Hannah had once innocently told him, a blessing to live with him, he made other people's lives so bright. She had no idea how dark the house could feel till he was gone—till, day after day slipping by, and he not returning, it settled itself for the time into a house without a master, a solar system without a sun.

When she recognised this, the sense of her fast-coming fate darkened down upon Hannah. She was not a young girl, to go on deceiving herself to the end; nay, hers was the kind of nature that cannot deceive itself if it would. During the first week of Bernard's absence she would have almost gone wild sometimes, but for the strong conviction—like poor Grace's, alas!—that she had done nothing wrong, and the feeling, still stronger, that she could always bear anything which only harmed herself.

Then she had the child. In all that dreadful time, which afterwards she looked back upon as a sort of nightmare, she kept Rosie always beside her. Looking in her darling's face—the little fragile flower which had blossomed into strength under her care, the piece of white paper upon which any careless hand

might have scribbled anything, to remain indelible through life—then Aunt Hannah took heart even in her misery. She *could* have done no wrong, since, whatever happened to herself, she had, by coming to Easterham, saved the child.

On the second Saturday of Mr. Rivers's absence, Hannah was sitting on the floor with Rosie in the drawing-room, between the lights. It had been a long, wet, winter day, and had begun with a perplexing visit from the churchwarden, wanting to know if the vicar had come home, and, if not, what must be done for Sunday. Hannah had had no letter, and could not tell; could only suggest that a neighbouring clergyman might probably have to be sent for, and arrange who it should be. And the vexed look of the old churchwarden—a respectable farmer—a certain wonder he showed at his principal's long absence—'so very unlike our parson'—together with a slight incivility to herself, which Hannah, so fearfully observant now, fancied she detected in his manner, made her restless and unhappy for hours after. Not till she had Rosie beside her, and drank of the divine Lethe-cup which infant hands always bring, did the painful impression subside. Now, in the peace of fire-light within, and a last amber gleam of rainy sunset without, she and Rosie had the world all to themselves; tiny fingers curled tightly round hers, with the sweet, imperative 'Tannie, tum here!' and a little blue and white fairy held out its mushroom-like frock, with 'Rosie dance, Tannie sing!' And Tannie did sing, with a clearness and cheerfulness long foreign to her voice; yet she had had a sweet voice when she was a girl. When this, her daily business of delight, came, the tempting spirits, half angel, half demon, which had begun to play at hide-and-seek through the empty chambers of poor Hannah's heart, fled away, exorcised by that magic spell which Heaven gives to every house that owns a child.

She was sitting there, going through 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary,' 'Banbury Cross,' the history of the young gentleman who 'put in his thumbs and pulled out the plums,' with other noble nursery traditions, all sung to tunes composed on the spot, in that sweet, clear soprano which always made Rosie put her small fingers up with a mysterious 'Hark! Tannie's singing!' when a ring came to the door-bell.

Hannah's heart almost stopped beating. Should she fly? Then there was a familiar voice in the hall, and Rosie shrieked out in ecstasy, 'Papa come! papa come!' Should she hide? Or should she stay, with the child beside her, a barrier against evil eyes and tongues without, and miserable thoughts within? Yes that was the best thing, and Hannah did it.

Mr. Rivers came in; and, shaking hands with his sister-in-law, took his little girl in his arms. Rosie clung to him in an ecstasy of delight. She, too, had not forgotten papa.

'I thought she would forget,' he said. 'Baby memories are short enough.'

'But Rosie is not a baby; and papa has only been away eleven days.'

Eleven days!—then he would know she had counted them. As soon as the words were uttered, Hannah could have bitten her tongue out with shame.

But no; he did not seem to notice them, or anything but his little girl. He set Rosie on his lap, and began playing with her, but fitfully and absently. He looked cold, pale, ill. At last he said, in a pathetic kind of way—

'Hannah, I wish you would give me a glass of wine. I am so tired.'

And the eyes which were lifted up to hers for a minute, had in them a world of weariness and sadness. They drove out of Hannah's mind all thoughts of how and why she and he had parted, and what might happen now they met, and threw her back into the

old domestic relationship between them. She took out her keys, got him food and drink, and watched him take both, and revive after them, with almost her old pleasure. Nay, she scarcely missed the old affectionate 'Thank you, Hannah, you are so good,'—which never came.

Presently, when Rosie, growing too restless for him, was dismissed with the customary 'Do take her, Aunt Hannah, nobody can manage her but you,' Hannah carried the little one to bed, and so disappeared, not a word or look having been exchanged between them except about the child. Still, as she left him sitting in his arm-chair by his own fireside, which he said he found so 'cosie,' she, like little Rosie, was conscious of but one feeling—gladness that papa was come home.

At dinner, too, how the whole table looked bright, now that the master's place was no longer vacant! Hannah resumed hers; and, in spite of the servants' haunting eyes and greedy ears, on the watch for every look and word that passed between these two innocent sinners, there was a certain peace and content in going back to the old ways once more.

When they were left alone together, over dessert, Mr. Rivers looked round the cheerful room, saying, half to himself, 'How comfortable it is to be at home!' and then smiled across the table to her, as if saying mutely what he had said in words a hundred times, that it was she who made his home so comfortable. And Hannah smiled in return, forgetting everything except the pleasantness of having him back again—the pure delight and rest in one another's society, which are at the root of all true friendship, all deep love. They did not talk much, indeed talking seemed dangerous; but they sat a long time in their opposite seats as they had sat day after day for so many months, trying to think, feel, and speak the same as heretofore.

But it was in vain. In this, as in all false positions, the light once admitted could never again be hidden from; the door once opened could never be shut.

Mr. Rivers proposed going to the drawing-room at once. 'I want to talk to you; and here the servants might be coming in.'

Hannah blushed violently, and then hated herself for doing so. Why should she be afraid of the servants coming in? Why tremble because he 'wanted to talk to her?' such a common occurrence,—a bit of their every-day life; which went on, and must go on, externally, just the same as before.

So she rose and they went into the drawing-room.

It was the prettiest room in the house; full of everything that a man of taste and refinement could desire, in order to make—and it does help to make—a happy home. Yet the master of it looked round with infinite sadness in his eyes, as if it gave him no pleasure, as if he hardly saw it.

'Hannah,' he said at last, when they had gone through the form of tea, and she had taken her work—another empty form, for her hands shook so she could hardly thread her needles—'Hannah, I had better not put off my business with you—my message to you, rather. You must understand I fulfil it simply as a matter of duty. I hope you will not be offended?'

'I offended?'

'You ought not to be, I think, in any case. No lady should take offence because an honest man presumes to love her. But I may as well speak out plainly. My friend Morecamb——'

'Oh, is it that matter again? I thought I was to hear no more of it.'

'You never would have done from me, but circumstances have altered a little, and I have been overborne by the opinion of others.'

'What others?'



‘Lady Rivers’ (Hannah started angrily). ‘To her, wisely or foolishly, Morecamb has appealed; and, by her advice, has again written to me. They both put it to me that it is my duty, as your brother-in-law, once more to lay the matter before you, and beg you to reconsider your decision. His letter—which I do not offer to show you, for he might not like it, and, besides, there are things said in it to myself which none but a very old friend would venture to say—his letter is thoroughly straightforward, manly, and generous. It makes me think, for the first time, that he is almost worthy of you. In it he says—may I repeat to you what he says?’

Hannah bent her head.

‘That his conviction of your worth and his attachment to yourself is such, that if you will only allow him to love you he shall be satisfied, and trust to time for the rest. He entreats you to marry him at once, and let him take you from Easterham, and place you in the position which, as his wife, you would of course have, and which he knows—we all know—you would so worthily fill.’

Bernard had said all this like a person speaking by rote, repeating carefully and literally all that he had before planned to say, and afraid of committing himself by the alteration of a word. Now he paused, and waited for an answer. It came not.

‘He desires me to tell you that, besides the rectory, he has a good private income; that his two daughters are both married; and that, in case of his death, you will be well provided for. It is a pleasant parish and a charming house. You would have a peaceful home, away, and yet not very far away, from Easterham. You might see Rosie every week——’

Here Hannah turned slowly round, and for the first time Bernard saw her face.

‘Good heavens!’ he cried. ‘What have I done? I meant no harm—Morecamb meant no harm.’

‘No,’ she answered, in a hard, dry tone. ‘He meant—I quite understand it, you see, and, since I understand it, why should I not speak of it?—he meant to stop the mouths of Easterham by marrying me, and taking me away from your house. He is exceedingly kind—and you also.’

‘I?—oh, Hannah!—I?’

‘Why distress yourself? Do I not say you are exceedingly kind?’

But she seemed hardly to know what she was saying. Her horrible, humiliating position between her brother-in-law and her brother-in-law’s friend, the one having unwillingly affixed the stain upon her name, which the other was generously trying to remove, burst upon her with an agony untold.

‘Why did I ever come here? Why were you so cruel as to ask me to come here? I came in all innocence. I knew nothing. You, a man, ought to have known.’

He turned deadly pale.

‘You mean to say I ought to have known that, although the law considers you my sister, you are not my sister, and our living together as we do would expose us to remarks such as James Dixon made the other night. Most true; I ought to have known. Was that all? or did you mean anything more than that?’

‘Nothing more. Is not that enough? Oh, it is dreadful—dreadful for an innocent woman to have to bear!’

And her self-control quite gone, Hannah rocked herself to and fro in such a passion of grief as she had never let any one witness in her since she was a child. For, indeed, woman as she was, she felt weak as a child.

But the man was weaker still. Once—twice, he made a movement as if he would dart across the hearth to where she sat; but restrained himself, and

remained motionless in his seat—attempting no consolation. What consolation could he give? It was he himself who had brought this slander upon her—how cruel and how widespread it was he by this time knew, even better than she.

‘Hannah,’ he said, after a little, ‘we are neither of us young people, to take fright at shadows. Let us speak openly together, as if we were two strangers, viewing the case of two other strangers, placed in the same relation together as ourselves.’

‘Speak? how can I speak? I am utterly helpless, and you know it. Lady Rivers knows it too; and so doubtless does Mr. Morecamb. Perhaps, after all, I should be wisest to accept his generous offer and marry him.’

Bernard started, and then composed himself into the same formal manner with which he had conducted the whole conversation.

‘Yes, in a worldly point of view, it would be wise; I, speaking as your brother-in-law, am bound to tell you so. I wish to do my duty by you; I have no right to allow my own or my child’s interest to stand in the way of your happiness.’ He paused. ‘I wish you to be happy—God knows I do!’ He paused again. ‘Then—what answer am I to give to Morecamb? Am I to tell him to come here and speak for himself?’

‘No!’ Hannah burst out vehemently. ‘No—a thousand times no! My heart is my own, and he has not got it. If I were a beggar starving in the streets, or a poor wretch whom everybody pointed the finger at—as perhaps they do—I would not marry Mr. Morecamb.’

A strange light came into Bernard’s eyes.

‘That’s Hannah!’ There speaks my good, true Hannah! I thought she had gone away, and some other woman come in her place. Forgive me! I did my duty; but oh! it was hard! I am so glad, so glad!’

He spoke with his old, affectionate, boyish impulsiveness; he was still exceedingly boyish in some things, and perhaps Hannah liked him the better for it—who knows? Even now a faint smile passed over her lips.

‘You ought to have known me better. You ought to have been sure that I would not marry any man without loving him. And I told you long ago that I did not love Mr. Morecamb.’

‘You did; but people sometimes change their minds. And love comes, we know not how. It begins—just a little seed, as it were—and grows, and grows, till all of a sudden we find it a full-grown plant, and we cannot root it up, however we try.’

He spoke dreamily, and as if he had forgotten all about Mr. Morecamb, then sat down and began gazing into the fire with that dull, apathetic look so familiar to Hannah during the early time of her residence there, when she knew him little, and cared for him less; when, if any one had told her there would come to her such a day as this day, when every word of the sentence he had just uttered would fall on her heart like a drop of burning lead, she would have pronounced it impossible—ridiculously impossible. Yet she was true then—true now—to herself and to all others; perfectly candid and sincere. But would the world ever believe it? Does the world, so ready to find out double or interested motives, ever believe in conscientious turncoats, righteous renegades? Yet there are such things.

After a while Mr. Rivers suddenly aroused himself.

‘I am thinking of other matters, and forgetting my friend. I had better put the good man out of his pain by telling him the truth at once; had I not, Hannah?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Your decision is quite irrevocable?’

‘Quite.’

‘Then we need say no more. I will write the letter at once.’

But that seemed not so easily done as said. After half-an-hour or more he came back with it unfinished in his hand.

‘I hardly know how to say what you wish me to say. A mere blank No, without any reasons given. Are there none which could make the blow fall lighter? Remember, the man loves you, Hannah, and love is a precious thing.’

‘I know it is, when one has love to give back; but I have none. Not an atom.’

‘Why not? I beg your pardon—I ought not to ask—I have not the slightest right to ask. Still, as I have sometimes thought, a woman seldom lives thirty years without—without some sort of attachment.’

Hannah became much agitated. Rosa, then, had kept sisterly faith, even towards her own husband. Mr. Rivers evidently knew nothing about Arthur; had been all along quite unaware of that sad but sacred story, which Hannah thought sheltered her just as much as widow’s weeds might have done.

She hesitated, and then, in her misery, she clung to the past as a kind of refuge from the present.

‘I thought you knew it,’ she answered very slowly and quickly; ‘I thought Rosa had told you. If it will lessen his pain, you may tell Mr. Morecamb that once I was engaged to be married to a cousin of mine. He was ill; they sent him away to Madeira, and there he died.’

‘He—I did not quite hear.’ For, indeed, Hannah’s words were all but inaudible.

‘He died!’

She had said it out now, and Bernard knew the whole. Those two silent ghosts, of his dead wife and her own dead lover, seemed to come and stand near them in the quiet room. Was it with looks of sorrow or anger?—if the dead can feel either. Arthur—

Rosa—in their lives both so loving, unselfish, and dear. Was it of them that the living needed to be afraid?

Mr. Rivers seemed not afraid, only exceedingly and painfully surprised.

‘I had no idea of such a thing, or I would never have urged Mr. Morecamb’s plea. And yet, tell me, Hannah, is this lost love the only cause of your refusing him? Was this what you referred to when you once said to me, or implied, that you would never marry anybody? Is all your heart, your warm, true, womanly heart, buried in your cousin’s grave?’

There may be circumstances in which people are justified in telling a noble lie; but Hannah was not the woman to do it. Not though it would at once have placed her beyond the reach of misconception, saved her from all others, and from herself—encompassed her henceforward with a permanent shield. Though one little ‘Yes,’ would have accomplished all this, she could not say it, for she felt it would have been a lie—a lie to heaven and to her own soul. She looked down on the floor, and answered deliberately—‘No!’

But the effort took all her strength, and when it was over she rose up tottering, and tried to feel her way to the door. Mr. Rivers opened it, not making the least effort to detain her.

‘Good night!’ she said, as she passed him. He, without even an offered hand, said ‘Good night,’ too; and so they parted.

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## CHAPTER IX.

HANNAH's waking-up on the morning after her brother-in-law's return was one of the most painful sensations she had ever known, the more so as it was so unusual. To her healthy temperament the morning hour was generally the best of the day. Not Rosie herself, who always woke up as lively as a young linnet in a thorn-bush, enjoyed it more than Aunt Hannah did. But now things seemed changed. She had gone to bed at once, and fallen asleep immediately; for there are times when the brain, worn out by long tension, collapses the instant we lie down—Nature forcing upon it the temporary stupefaction which is its only preservative.

Now even she could not shake off weariness, nor rise as usual to look at one of those glorious winter sunrises which only active people see. She dreaded the dawn—she shrank from the sun. For he brought her her daily duties, and how she should ever fulfil them as heretofore she could not tell.

First, how should she again meet Mr. Rivers? What position should she hold towards him? Had her sister lived, he would have been to her nothing at all; regarded with the sacred indifference with which every pure-minded woman regards every other woman's husband. Now what was he? Not her brother—except by a legal fiction, which he had himself recognised as a fiction. Not her lover; and yet when she recalled his looks and tones, and a certain indescribable agitation which had been upon him all the evening, some feminine instinct told her that, under other circumstances, he might have become her lover. Her husband he could never be; and yet she had to go on living with him in an

anomalous relationship, which was a compound of all these three ties, with the difficulties of all and the comfort of none. Her friend he was; that bond seemed clear and plain; but then is it customary for a lady to go and keep the house of a male 'friend,' be he ever so tried and trusted? Society, to say nothing of her own feelings, would never allow it; and for once society is in the right.

Hannah felt it so — felt that, stripping off the imaginary brother-and-sister bond, Bernard and she were exactly in the position of a lady and gentleman living together in those Platonic relations which are possible certainly, but which the wicked world never believes to be possible, and which Nature herself rejects as being out of the ordinary course of things, and therefore very unadvisable. A life difficult enough to carry on even if the parties were calmly indifferent to one another; but what if they were not indifferent? Though he had never 'made love' to her in the smallest degree, never caressed her, even in the harmless salutations which brothers and sisters-in-law so commonly indulge in, still Hannah must have been dull indeed not to have long since found out that in some way or other Bernard was very fond of her; and a young man is not usually 'very fond' of a woman, not his own born sister, without, sooner or later, wishing to monopolise her, to have her all to himself—in plain terms, to marry her. And though women have much less of this exclusive feeling—though many a woman will go on innocently adoring a man for years without the slightest wish of personal appropriation—still, when somebody else appropriates him—marries him, in short—and the relations are changed, and she drops into a common friend, or less than a friend, even the noblest and most unselfish woman living will feel, for a time, a slight pang, a blank in her life, a soreness at her heart. It



is Nature's revenge upon all shams, however innocent those shams may be.

And poor Hannah was reaping Nature's revenge now. Whether he did or did not love her in a brotherly way, she was cruelly conscious that to go on living with her brother-in-law as heretofore would be a very severe trial. Should she fly from it? The way was open. She could write to Lady Dunsmore, who she knew was again in search of a governess, and would gladly welcome her back. Two days, or one day even, and she might resume her old life, her old duties, and forget this year and half at Easterham as if it had never been.

For a moment the temptation was strong. She felt hunted down; like the Israelites, with the Egyptians behind and the Red Sea before, the dreadful surging sea of the future, over which there seemed no pathway, no possible way of crossing it to any safe shore. If she could but escape, with her reputation clear, out of her brother-in-law's house!—that House on the Hill which had been so pleasant, which she had tried to make a sort of home-beacon to all the parish; and now all the parish levelled at it their cruel stares, their malignant comments, for it was exposed to all. For Bernard's sake, as well as her own, she ought to save him from this—free him from her blighting presence and go.

As she lay thinking, turning over in her mind how best to accomplish this—when she should write and what she should say to Lady Dunsmore—there came the usual little knock at her door, the usual sound of tiny bare feet trotting over the carpet, and the burst of joyous child-laughter at her bedside. And when she hardly noticed it, for it pierced her like a sword, there came a loud wail. 'Tannie, take her! Take Rosie in Tannie arms.' Poor Tannie sprang up, and felt that all her well-woven plans were torn down like spider-webs. To go away and leave her child! The thing was impossible.

Our lives, like the year, go through a succession of seasons, which may come early or late, but come in regular order. We do not find fruit in March or primroses in August. Thus, though Hannah's heart now, strangely stirred as it was, had a primrose breath of Spring quivering through it, it was not exactly the heart of a girl. She was a woman of thirty, and though she loved—alas, she knew it now only too well!—she did not love romantically, absorbingly. Besides, co-existent with this love had come to her that other sentiment, usually of much later growth—the maternal instinct, which in her was a passion too. Bernard's one rival, and no small one, was his own little child.

As Hannah pressed Rosie to her bosom, all her vague terrors, her equally dreadful delights, faded away into quiet realities, and by the time she had had the child with her for an hour, she felt quite herself again, and was able to carry Rosie down to the Sunday breakfast-table, where the small woman had lately begun to appear, conducting herself like a little princess.

Oh, what a blessing she was! the pretty little maid! How her funny ways, her wonderful attempts at English, and her irresistible bursts of laughter, smoothed over difficulties untold, and helped them through that painful hour—those two, who stood to the little one like father and mother, and yet to one another were nothing, and never could be. This was the strange anomaly of their relationship: that while Rosie was her own flesh and blood, closer to her than any child not her very own could possibly be, between herself and Rosie's father there was no tie of blood at all.

The usual Sunday morning routine went on—prayers, breakfast, after breakfast play with Rosie—yet neither Hannah nor Bernard ventured once to look at each other, lest they should betray the piteous secret which, whether or not hers did, the deadly pale-

ness of Bernard's features, and his nervous, excited manner, only too much revealed.

'I scarcely slept an hour,' he said. 'I had to sit up and write my sermon. And I found so much to do among my papers. I must never leave home again.'

She was silent.

Then he asked her if she was going to church—an idle question for one who never missed church in any weather. Perhaps he did not want her to go? And she would have been angry, but for the strange compassion she always had for him—the feeling that, if any trouble came to him, she should always like to bear it herself. And now he had more to bear than she. He must go up into his pulpit and preach, conscious that all eyes were watching him, all tongues gossiping concerning him! For in Easterham nothing was hid; rich and poor alike chattered of their neighbours' affairs, and James Dixon's visit to the House on the Hill, in all its particulars, was likely to be as fully known as Mr. Morecamb's interview with Lady Rivers, and its purport as regarded Hannah herself.

The Moat-House, too, must be faced, for at breakfast-time a note had come asking them to dine there, though it was Sunday, as young Mrs. Melville had come over for the day, and particularly wished to see Miss Thelluson.

'You will go?' Bernard had said, passing the note over to her. Her first instinct had been a decided 'No;' till, looking down on the bright little face beside her, Aunt Hannah felt that, at whatever cost, she must boldly show her own—at church, at the Moat-House, anywhere and everywhere. There were just two courses open to her—to succumb to the lie, or to meet it and trample it down. So, again taking Rosie in her arms, she looked up fearlessly at Rosie's father.

'Yes, since Lady Rivers asks me, I will certainly go.'

It was Hannah's custom to get ready for church

quite early, that she might walk with Bernard thither—he disliked walking alone. Never was there a man who clung more affectionately to companionship, or to whom it was more necessary. But this Sunday he never summoned her, so she did not come. Indeed, she had determined not. She watched him start off alone, and then followed, going a longer way round, so that she only reached her pew when he reached his reading-desk. Then the sad tone of his voice as he read, evidently with an effort, the sentence, ‘If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,’ &c., went to her heart.

Were they sinners? Was it a crime for her to look now at her dead sister’s husband, her living Rosie’s father, and think that his was one of the sweetest, noblest faces she had ever seen; that had she met him by chance, and he had cared for her, she could have tended him like a mother, served him like a slave—nay, have forgotten for his sake that sacred dream of so many years, the lost love of her girlhood, and become an ordinary human wife and mother—Rosie’s mother? And it would all have seemed so right and natural, and they three would have been so happy. Could it be a sin now? Could any possible interpretation, secular or religious, construe it into a sin?

Poor Hannah! Even in God’s house these thoughts pursued her; for, as before said, her only law of conduct was how things were, not in the sight of man, but of God. That love which was either a righteous affection or a deadly sin, could she once assure herself that He did not forbid it, little she cared whether man forbade it or not. Nor, if it were holy, whether it were a happy love or not.

Thus, during her solitary walk home, and a long solitary afternoon that she spent with Rosie—earning that wonderful rest of mind and fatigue of body which the companionship of a child always brings—her

thoughts grew clearer. Rosa's very spirit, which now and then looked strangely out of her daughter's eyes, seemed to say that the dead view all things with larger vision than ours, that in their passing away they have left all small jealousies behind them, and remember only the good of their beloved, not themselves at all.

'Oh, Rosa, Rosa!' Hannah thought to herself, 'surely you are not angry with me, not even now! I am not stepping into your place and stealing away your joys; I have only tried to fulfil your duties towards this little one and towards him. You know how helpless he is alone! And his pretty lamb—I have to take care of them both. Rosie, my darling, who could ever love you like Tannie? Yet they say it is all unnatural and wrong—that any strange woman would be a better mother to you than I! But that is false, altogether false. When your own mother comes to look at you, as she may do every night,—I would, if I were a happy ghost and God would let me,—Rosie, look at her and tell her so!'

These wild and wandering thoughts, the last of which had been said out loud, must have brought a corresponding expression to Hannah's face, for the child caught it, and fixing on her that deep, wise, almost supernatural gaze she sometimes had, answered deliberately, 'Yes.' For 'No'—given with a sweet decisiveness, as if she already knew her own mind—the baby! and a gentle satisfied 'Yes' were among the earliest accomplishments of auntie's darling.

But when Rosie was put to bed, and left wide awake in her little crib, fearless of darkness or anything under Tannie's 'lots of tisses,' left to curl round and fall asleep in the blessed peace of infancy, innocent of all earthly cares—then this world's bitterness darkened down again upon poor Aunt Hannah. She went to dress for the Moat-House dinner, and prepare to in the family circle, where she, always an uncomfortable excrescence, was now regarded—how and in what

light did they regard her? Hannah could not tell; she was going there in order to find out.

Of one thing she was sure, the invitation was not given out of pure kindness. Kindness was not the habit of the Rivers family; they generally had a purpose in all they did. More than once lately, Lady Rivers had told her, in as plain terms as so polite a person could, that she—Hannah—stood in the way of her brother-in-law's marriage; that his family wished him married, and she ought to aid them in every possible way towards that desirable end. Could there be a plan formed for lecturing her on this point?

But no. Bernard would never have allowed it. Yet if he had, Hannah would not have turned back; she had always faced her fate, this solitary woman, and as she now walked alone in the early winter darkness through Easterham village, she braced up her courage and faced it still.

Externally, there seemed nothing to face; only a bright, pleasant drawing-room, and a circle of charming, well-dressed women, whose conversation suddenly paused at her entrance, as if they had been talking her over, feminine fashion, which no doubt they had. Hannah was sure of it. She knew the way they used to talk over other people—the Melville family above all, till Adeline belonged to it—with that sweet acerbity and smooth maliciousness which only women understand. A man's weapons smite keen, but they generally smite straightforwards. Women only give the underhand thrusts, of which Hannah that night had not a few.

‘What a long, dark walk, Miss Thelluson! only you never mind dark walks. Were you really quite alone? And what has become of Bernard? for you generally know all his proceedings. We thought him looking so well—so much the better for going from home. But what can he have done with himself since church-time? Are you quite sure that——’

The question was stopped by Bernard's entrance—ten minutes after the dinner hour, of which unpunctuality Sir Austin bitterly complained; and then offered his arm to Hannah, who stood silent and painfully conscious, under the battery of four pair of feminine family eyes.

'I have been home to fetch Miss Thelluson,' said Bernard. 'Hannah, you should not have walked here alone.'

And he would have taken a seat beside her, but Lady Rivers signed for Bertha to occupy it. Fenced in by a sister on each side, he had not a chance of a word with Hannah all dinner-time.

It was the same thing afterwards. Miss Thelluson would have been amused, if she had not been a little vexed and annoyed, to see herself thus protected, like an heiress in her teens, from every approach of the obnoxious party. Mother and daughters mounted guard successively, keeping her always engaged in conversation, and subjecting Bernard to a sort of affectionate imprisonment, whence, once or twice, he vainly tried to escape. She saw it, for somehow, without intending it, she always saw him everywhere, and was conscious that he saw her, and listened to every word she was saying. Yet she made no effort to get near him, not even when she noticed him surreptitiously take out his watch and look at it wearily, as if entreating 'Do let us go home.' Every simple word and act of a month ago had a meaning, a dreadful meaning, now.

Hannah was not exactly a proud woman, but she had a quiet dignity of her own, and it was sorely tried this night. Twenty times she would have started up from the smooth, polite circle, feeling that she could support it no longer, save for Bernard's sad, appealing face and his never-ending endurance. But then they loved him in their own way, and they were his 'people,' and he bore from them what he would never have borne from strangers. So must she.

So she took refuge beside Adeline's sofa. Young Mrs. Melville had never been well since her marriage; they said the low situation of Melville Grange did not agree with her. And ill-health being quite at a discount among the Rivers girls, who were as strong as elephants, Adeline lay rather neglected, watching her husband laughing and talking with her sisters — flirting with them, people might have said, almost as much as before he was married; only, being a brother now, of course it did not matter. Nevertheless, there was at times a slight contraction of the young wife's brow, as if she did not altogether like it. But she laughed it off at once.

'Herbert is so merry, and so fond of coming here. Our girls amuse him much more than his own sisters, he says. Just listen how they are all laughing together now'

'It is good to laugh,' said Hannah quietly.

'Oh, yes; I am glad they enjoy themselves,' returned Adeline, and changed the conversation; but through it all, the pale, vexed face, the anxious eyes, heavy with an unspoken anger, an annoyance that could not be complained of, struck Hannah with pity. Here, she thought, was a false position too.

At nine the butler came in, announcing formally, 'Miss Thelluson's servant.'

'It is Grace. I told her to call for me on her way from chapel. I wished to go home early.'

'And without Bernard? I understand. Very right; very nice,' whispered Lady Rivers, in a tone of such patronising approval that Hannah repented herself of having thus planned, and was half inclined to call Mr. Rivers out of the dining-room, and tell him she was going. But she did not. She only rose, and bade them all good night. Not one rough word had broken the smooth surface of polite conversation; yet she was fully aware that, though with that convenient plastering over of sore or ugly places peculiar



to the Rivers family, they said nothing, they all knew well, and knew that she knew they knew, why she was going, and the instant her back was turned would talk her over to their hearts' content. Yet she walked out of the room slowly, calmly, with that dignified, lady-like presence she had, almost better than beauty. Yes, even though she saw Lady Rivers rise to accompany her up-stairs—a piece of condescension so great that there was surely some purpose in it Lady Rivers seldom took trouble without a purpose.

Yet for a moment she hesitated, sat pulling her rings off and on, and eyeing with her critical woman-of-the-world gaze this other woman, who fulfilled the apostolic law of being in the world, not of it. The long strain of the evening had worn Hannah out, and she was in doubt whether Bernard would like her stealing off thus—whether, since Lady Rivers thought it 'wise,' it really was not most unwise thus to condense the cloudy scandal into shape by paying it the respect of acceptance. As she tied her bonnet, her hands trembled a little.

'Are you ready? Then, Miss Thelluson, may I say just one word before you go? As a married lady and the mother of a family, speaking to a young—no, not exactly a young, but an unmarried—person, may I ask, is it true what I hear, that you have had a definite offer of marriage from Mr. Morecamb?'

Hannah started indignantly, and then composed herself.

'I do not quite see that the matter concerns any one but myself and Mr. Morecamb. But since you have heard this, I conclude he has told you. Yes, it is true.'

'And what answer did you give? You may as well tell me, for he will; he is coming here to-morrow.'

Hannah waited a moment. 'I have given the only answer I could give—No.'

Lady Rivers sprang from her chair. 'Good hea-

vens! Are you mad? My dear Miss Thelluson, I beg your pardon; but really—to refuse such an offer! If Mr. Morecamb had come and asked me for one of my own daughters, I would at least have considered the matter. To one in your position, and under present circumstances——

‘Excuse me, Lady Rivers; but I am myself the best judge of my own position and circumstances.’

‘So gentlemanly of him, too—so honourable—when he knew, as everybody knows, the way you are being talked about!’

‘He did know, then—’ and Hannah checked herself. ‘Will you oblige me by telling me what he knew? How am I being talked about?’ And she turned her face, white as that of a traveller who walks up to face a supposed ghost by a churchyard wall; shuddering, but still facing it. It may be only a dead tree, after all.

‘I am very sorry,’ said Lady Rivers; and no doubt she was, for she disliked saying unpleasant things, except in a covert way. ‘It is a most awkward matter to speak about, and I have kept it from the girls as long as possible; but people say in Easterham that it was not for nothing you took part with that unfortunate Grace—Dixon I can’t call her, as she has no right to the name. In fact I have heard it suggested plainly enough that the reason of Bernard’s not marrying is because, were it not for the law, he would like to marry you.’

Hannah stood silent. All the blood in her heart seemed to stand still too.

‘We do not believe it, of course. Neither does Mr. Morecamb. Still it is generally believed at Easterham,—and worse things, too.’

‘What worse things? Tell me. I insist upon hearing.’

Hannah spoke, as she had listened, with a desperate calmness; for she felt that at all costs she must

get to the bottom of the scandal—must know exactly how much she had to fight against, and whom.

‘Miss Thelluson, you are the very oddest person I ever knew. Well, they say that—that—— Excuse me, but I really don’t know how to tell you.’

‘Then I will tell you; for I heard James Dixon say it, and before my own servants—as of course you know; everybody knows everything in Easterham. They say, these wicked neighbours, that I, a woman not young, not pretty, not attractive in any way, with her dead sister’s memory yet fresh in her heart, and her dead sister’s child in her arms, am living in unlawful relations with that sister’s husband. Lady Rivers, I do not wonder that you shrink from repeating such an atrocious lie.’

The other was a little confounded. She had been so very patronising, so condescendingly kind in her manner, to this poor Miss Thelluson, who now stood and looked at her face to face, as much a lady as herself, and ten times more of a woman. Nay, the fire in the grey eyes, the dignity of the figure, made Hannah for the moment even a handsome woman, handsome enough to be admired by many a man.

‘Pray don’t talk of lies, Miss Thelluson. We object to such an ugly word out of the schoolroom—where, however, your experience must chiefly have lain. This is what made me resolve to speak to you. You cannot be expected to know the world, nor how important it is for Bernard, as a gentleman and a clergyman, that this gossip should be stopped at once. Of course, I only refer to the nonsense about his wishing to marry you. For the rest, his own character—the character of the family—is enough denial. Still the thing is unpleasant, very unpleasant, and I don’t wonder that Bernard feels it acutely.’

Hannah started. ‘Does he? Did he tell you so?’

‘Not exactly; he is a very reserved person, as we all know; but he looks thoroughly wretched. We,

his family, see that; though you, a stranger, may not. The fact is, he has placed himself, quite against our advice, in a most difficult and painful position, and does not know how to get out of it. You ought to help him; as, most providentially, you have now the means of doing.'

Hannah looked up. She was being pricked to death with needles; but still she looked firmly in the face of her adversary, and asked, 'How?'

'Do you not see, my dear Miss Thelluson, that every bit of gossip and scandal would necessarily die out if you married Mr. Morecamb?'

Hannah was but human. For a moment the thought of escape—of flying out of this maze of misery into a quiet home, where a good man's love would at least be hers—presented itself to her mind, tempting her, as many another woman has been tempted, into marriage without love. But immediately her honest soul recoiled.

'Lady Rivers, I would do a great deal for my brother-in-law, who has been very kind to me; but not even for his sake—since you put it so—can I marry Mr. Morecamb. And now'—turning round with sudden heat—'since you have said all you wanted to say, and I have answered it, will you let me go home?'

Home! As she uttered the word, ending thus the conversation as quietly, to all appearance, as it had begun—though she knew it had been all a planned attack, and that the ladies down-stairs were all waiting eagerly to hear the result of it—as she spoke of home, Hannah felt what a farce it was. Had it been a real brother's home, there at least was external protection. So likewise was there in that other home which, when she had saved enough, she had one day meant to have—some tiny cottage where by her own conduct a single woman can always protect herself keep up her own dignity, and carry out, if ever so humbly, her own independent life. Now, this was lost,

and the other not gained. As she walked on towards the House on the Hill—that cruel ‘home’ where she and Bernard must live henceforward, as if in a house of glass, exposed to every malicious eye, Hannah felt that somehow or other she had made a terrible mistake. Almost as great a one as that of the poor girl who walked silently by her side, asking no questions—Grace never did ask any—but simply following her mistress with tender, observant, unceasing care.

‘Don’t let us go through the village,’ whispered she. ‘I’ll take you round a nearer way, where there are not half so many folk about.’

‘Very well, Grace; only let us get home quickly. You are not afraid of meeting anybody?’

For Jem Dixon was still at Easterham, she knew, though nothing had been seen of him since that night.

‘No, no,’ sighed Grace; ‘nobody will trouble me. The master frightened him, I think. My sister told me the master did really speak to the police about him in case he should trouble us while he was away. Look, Miss Thelluson, there he is.’

Not Jem Dixon, but Mr. Rivers; yet Hannah instinctively shrank back under the shadow of a high wall, and let him pass her by. She made no explanation to her servant for this; what could she say? And Grace seemed to guess it all without her telling.

It was a bitter humiliation, to say nothing of the pain. As she bade Grace keep close to her, while they hurried along by narrow alleys and cross-cuts, the thought of that happy walk home under the stars, scarcely a fortnight ago, came back to Hannah’s mind. Alas! such could never be again. Their halcyon days were done. In her imaginary wickedness, her sinless shame, she almost felt as if she could understand the agony of a real sin—of a woman who loves some other woman’s husband, or some man besides her own husband—any of those dreadful stories which she had heard of afar off, but had never seemed to

realise. Once no power of will could put her in the place of these miserable sinners. Now, perhaps, she was as miserable a sinner as any one of them all.

When reaching the gate she saw Mr. Rivers standing there waiting. She drew back as if it were really so—as if it were a sin for him to be watching for her, as he evidently was, with the kindly tenderness of old.

‘Hannah, how could you think of starting off alone? You make me miserable by such vagaries.’

He spoke angrily—that fond anger which betrays so much; and when he found he had betrayed it to more than herself, he, too, started.

‘I did not know Grace was with you; that alters the case a little. Grace, take Miss Thelluson’s wet cloak off, and tell the servants to come at once to prayers.’

He was wise and kind. Hannah recognised that, in spite of the bitter feeling that it should be necessary for him to be wise and kind. She came into his study after all the servants were assembled there; and as she knelt near him, listening to the short service customary on Sunday nights, her spirit grew calmer. No one could hear Bernard Rivers, either in his pulpit, as that morning, or among his little household congregation, as now, without an instinctive certainty that he was one of the ‘pure in heart,’ who are for ever ‘blessed.’

The servants gone, he and she stood by the fire alone. There was a strange look upon both their faces, as if of a storm past or a storm brooding. Since this time last night, when, after her sore confession was wrung from her, Hannah had tottered away out of the room, she and her brother-in-law had never been one minute alone together, nor had exchanged any but the briefest and most commonplace words. They did not now. They just stood one on either side the fire—so near yet so apart.

A couple that any outside observer would have

judged well suited. Both in the prime of life; yet, though he was a little the younger, he did not seem so, more especially of late, since he had grown so worn and anxious looking. Both pleasant to behold, though he had more of actual physical beauty than she; but Hannah had a spiritual charm about her such as few handsome women possess. And both were at that season of life when, though boy-and-girl fancies are over, the calm, deep love of mature years is at its meridian, and a passion conceived then usually lasts for life. And these two, with every compulsion to love, from within and without, pressing hard upon them—respect, tenderness, habit, familiarity—with no law, natural or divine, forbidding that love, in case it should arise between them, had to stand there, man and woman, brother and sister so called, and ignore and suppress it all.

That there was something to be suppressed appeared plainly enough. In neither was the free-hearted unconsciousness which, when an accusation is wholly untrue, laughs at it and passes it by. Neither looked towards the other; they stood both gazing wistfully into the fire, until the silence became intolerable. Then Hannah, but without extending her hand as usual, bade him ‘Good night.’

‘Good night? Why so?’

‘I am going up-stairs to look at Rosie.’

‘I believe if the world were coming to an end in half-an-hour, you would still be “going up-stairs to look at Rosie.”’

The excessive irritability which always came when he was mentally disturbed, and had been heavy upon him in the early time of his sorrow, seemed revived again. He could not help it; and then he was so mournfully contrite for it.

‘Oh, forgive me, Hannah! I am growing a perfect bear to you. Come down-stairs again and talk to me. For we must speak out. We cannot go on like

this; it will drive me wild. We must come to some conclusion or other. Make haste back, and we will speak together, just as friends, and decide what it shall be.'

Alas! what could it be? Every side she looked, Hannah saw no path out of the maze. Not even when, seeing that Grace sat reading her Bible by the nursery fire—Grace was a gentle, earnest Methodist, very religious in her own fashion—she sat down beside *her* living Bible, her visible revelation of Him who was once, like Rosie, a Christmas child, and tried to think the matter quietly out, to prepare herself humbly for being led, not in her own way, but in God's way. The more as it was not her own happiness she sought, but that of those two committed to her charge in so strange a manner—the man being almost as helpless and as dependent upon her as the child. For she had not lived with Bernard thus long without discovering all his weaknesses, which were the very points upon which she knew herself most strong. When he called, as he did twenty times a-day, 'Hannah, help me!' she was fully conscious that she did and could help him better than any one else. Did she like him the less for this? Most women—especially those who have the motherly instinct strongly developed—will find no difficulty in answering the question.

How peaceful the nursery was—so warm, and safe, and still. Not a sound but the clock ticking on the chimneypiece, and the wind murmuring outside, and the soft breathing out of that darkened corner where, smuggled down under the bed-clothes, with the round little head and its circle of bright hair just peeping above, 'Tannie's wee dormouse,' as she sometimes called her, slept her sound, innocent sleep.

Aunt Hannah bent over her darling with a wild constriction of the heart. What if the 'conclusion' to which Mr. Rivers said they must come to-night implied her going away—leaving Rosie behind? The thought was too much to bear.



‘I will not—I will not! God gave me the child, God only shall take her from me!’

And rushing to her own room, she vainly tried to compose herself before appearing in Rosie’s father’s sight. In vain. His quick eye detected at once that she had been crying; he said so, and then her tears burst out afresh.

‘I am so miserable—so miserable! Don’t send me away—don’t take Rosie from me. I can bear anything but that. It would break my heart if I had to part from my child!’

He answered calmly—was it also a little coldly?—

‘Don’t distress yourself, Hannah; I had no thought of taking Rosie from you. I promised you she should be all your own, and I mean to keep my word.’

‘Thank you.’

She dried her tears, though she was, indeed, strangely excited still; and they sat down for that serious talk together which was to have—who knew what end?

The beginning was not easy, though Bernard did begin at once.

‘I shall not detain you long, though it is still early; but I must have a few words with you. First, to apologise for a question I put to you last night, which I now feel was intrusive and wrong.’

Which question—that about Mr. Morecamb, or the final one, which she had answered with such sore truthfulness—he did not say, and she did not inquire.

Bernard continued—

‘Let us put that matter aside, and speak only of our own present affairs. I want you to give me your advice on a point in which a woman is a better judge than any man; especially as it concerns a woman.’

A woman? Hannah leaped at once to the heart of the mystery, if mystery it were. Her only course was to solve it without delay.

‘Is it your possible marriage?’

‘It is. Not my love, understand; only my marriage.’

They were silent—he watching her keenly. Hannah felt it, and set her face like a stone. She seemed, indeed, growing into stone.

‘My family—as they may have told you, for they tell it to all Easterham—are most anxious I should marry. They have even been so kind as to name to me the lady, whom, as we both know her, I will not name, except to say that she is very young, very pretty, very rich; fulfils all conditions they desire for me, not one of which I desire for myself. Also, they tell me—though I scarcely believe this—that, if I asked her, she would not refuse me.’

‘You have not asked her, then?’

‘If I had, there would be little need for the questions I wished to put to you. First, what is your feeling about second marriages?’

‘I thought you knew it. I must surely have said it to you some time?’

‘You never have; say it, then’

Why should she not? Nothing tied her tongue now. The end she had once hoped for, then doubted, then feared, was evidently at hand. He was, after all, going to marry. In a totally unexpected way, her path was being made plain.

Hannah was not a girl, and her self-control was great. Besides, she had suffered so much of late, that even the very fact of an end to the suffering was relief. So she spoke out as if she were not herself, but somebody else, standing quite apart from poor Hannah Thelluson—to whom it had been the will of God that no love-bliss should ever come.

‘I think, with women, second marriages are a doubtful good. If the first one has been happy, we desire no other—we can cherish a memory and sit beside a grave for ever; if unhappy, we dread renewing our unhappiness. Besides, children so fill up a

woman's heart, that the idea of giving her little ones a second father would be to most women very painful, nay, intolerable. But with men it is quite different. I have said to Lady Rivers many a time, that from the first day I came it was my most earnest wish you should find some suitable wife, marry her, and be happy—as happy as you were with my sister.'

'Thank you.'

That dreadful formality of his—formality and bitterness combined! And Hannah knew his manner so well; knew every change in his face—a very tell-tale face; Bernard was none of your reserved heroes who are always wearing a mask.' Her heart yearned over him. Alas! she had spoken truly when she said it was not buried in Arthur's grave. It was quick and living—full of all human affections and human longings still.

'Then, sister Hannah, I have your full consent to my marriage? A mere *mariage de convenance*, as I told you. Not like my first one—ah, my poor Rosa, *she* loved me! No woman will ever love me so well.'

Hannah was silent.

'Do you think it would be wrong to Rosa, my marrying again?'

'Not if you loved again. Men often do.'

'And women never? Did you mean that?'

'I hardly know what I mean, or what I say,' cried Hannah piteously. 'It is all so strange, so bewildering. Tell me exactly how the thing stands in plain words, and let me go.'

'I will let you go; I will trouble you no more about myself or my affairs. You do not care for me, Hannah, you only care for the child. But that is natural—quite natural. I was a fool to expect any more.'

Strange words for a man to say to a woman, under any feeling but one. Hannah began to tremble violently.

‘What could you expect more?’ she faltered. ‘Have I not done my duty to you—my sisterly duty?’

‘We are *not* brother and sister, and we lie—we lie to our own souls—in calling ourselves so.’

He spoke passionately; he seized her hand, then begged her pardon; suddenly went back to his own place, and continued the conversation.

‘We are neither of us young, Hannah—not boy and girl anyhow—and we have been close friends for a long time. Let us speak openly together, just as if we were two departed souls looking out of Paradise at ourselves, our old selves—as our Rosa may be looking now.’

Our Rosa! It went to Hannah’s heart. The tenderness of the man, the unforgetfulness! Ah, if men knew how women prize a man who does not forget!

‘Yes,’ she repeated softly, ‘our Rosa.’

‘Oh, that it were she who was judging us, not these!’

‘Not who?’

‘The Moat-House—the village—everybody. It is vain for us to shut our eyes, or our lips either. Hannah, this is a cruel crisis for you and me. People are talking of us on every hand; taking away our good name even. James Dixon’s is not the only wicked tongue in the world. It is terrible, is it not?’

‘No,’ she said, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘At least, not so terrible but that I can bear it.’

‘Can you? Then I ought too. And yet I feel so weak. You have no idea what I have suffered of late. Within and without, nothing but suffering, till I have thought the only thing to do was to obey my family’s wish, and marry. But whether I marry or not, the thing seems plain—we cannot go on living as we have done. For your sake as well as my own—for they tell me I am compromising you cruelly—we must have some change. Oh, Hannah; what have I said, what have I done?’

For she had risen up, the drooping softness of her attitude and face quite gone.

‘I understand you. You need not explain further. You wish me to leave you. So I will; to-morrow if you choose; only I must take the child with me. I will have the child!’ she continued in a low desperate voice ‘Do what you like, marry whom you like, but the child is mine. Her own father shall not take her from me.’

‘He has no wish. Her unfortunate father!’

And never since his first days of desolation had Hannah seen on Bernard’s countenance such an expression of utter despair.

‘You shall settle it all,’ he said; ‘you who are so prudent, and wise, and calm. Think for me, and decide.’

‘What am I to think or decide?’ And Hannah vainly struggled after the calmness he imputed to her. ‘How can I put myself in your place, and know what you would wish?’

‘What I would *wish*! Oh, Hannah! is it possible you do not guess?’

She must have been deaf and blind not to have guessed. Dumb she was—dumb as death—while Bernard went on, speaking with excited rapidity.

‘When a man’s wish is as hopeless and unattainable as a child’s for the moon, he had better not utter it. I have long thought this. I think so still. Happy in this world I can never be; but what would make me least unhappy would be to go on living as we do, you and Rosie and I, if such a thing were possible.’

‘Is it impossible?’ For with this dumbness of death had come over Hannah also the peace of death—as if the struggle of living were over, and she had passed into another world. She knew Bernard loved her, though they could never be married, no more than the angels. Still, he loved her. She was content. ‘Is it impossible?’ she repeated in her grave,

tender, soothing voice. 'Evil tongues would die out in time—the innocent are always stronger than the wicked. And our great safeguard against them is such a life as yours has been. You can have almost no enemies.'

'Ah!' replied he mournfully, 'but in this case a man's foes are they of his own household. My people—there is no fighting against them. What do you think—I am talking to you, Hannah, as if you were not yourself, but some other person—what do you think my stepmother said to me to-night? That unless you married Mr. Morecamb, or I Alice Melville (there, her name is out, but no matter)—unless either of these two things happened, or I did the other wicked, heart-breaking thing of turning you out of my doors, she would never admit you again into hers—that, in fact, to-night is the last time you will be received at the Moat-House.'

Hannah's pride rose. 'So be it. I am not aware that that would be such a terrible misfortune.'

'You unworldly woman, you do not know! Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Hannah; I am forgetting all you must feel. I am speaking to you as if you were my conscience—my very own soul—which you are.'

The love that glowed in his eyes, the emotion that trembled in his voice! Hannah was not a young woman, nor, naturally, a passionate woman, but she would have been a stone not to be moved now. She sat down, hiding her face in her hands.

'Oh, it is hard, hard!' she sobbed. 'When we might have been so happy—we and our child!'

Bernard left his seat, and came closer to hers. His breath was loud and fast, and his hands as he took Hannah's—grasping them so tight that she could not unloose them, though she faintly tried—were shaking much.

'Tell me—I never believed it possible till now, I thought you so calm and cold, and you knew all my

faults, and I have been harsh to you often—only too often!—but, Hannah, if such a thing could be, if the law allowed it—man's law, for God's is on our side—if we could have been married, would you have married me?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, putting both her hands on his shoulders, and looking at him with a sad solemnity, as of those who take farewell for life; ‘yes, I would!’

Then, before he had time to answer, Hannah was gone.

## CHAPTER X.

FOR the second time Hannah fled away from her brother-in-law's presence into her own room, and tried to realise what had happened. Something which would for ever prevent their two lives from going on together as before—a distinct mutual acknowledgment that they did not love one another like brother and sister, that he would have married her if he could, and that if he had asked her she would not have refused him.

This confession on her part had been unintentional, wrung from her by the emotion of the time and by the direct question which had been put to her, and Hannah was the kind of woman who never thought of compromising or playing with the truth. Still, when it was made, and henceforth irrevocable, it startled her. Not that she felt it in the least wrong. The idea that to love or marry her sister's husband was a moral offence had now entirely left her mind; but it was such an absolute ignoring of her own past—her dear, cherished, sacred past—that it at first almost overwhelmed her. She sighed as if it had been an unrequited instead of a fondly-sought attachment which she had confessed.

For it had crept into her heart unawares, and no in the ordinary guise of love at all. Pity, affection, the tender habit of household happiness, had drawn her day by day to Rosie's father, chiefly because he was a father and a widower, scarcely a young man in any sense regarding her; supposing she had considered herself still a young woman, which she did not. It was only when her youth forced itself up like an imprisoned stream, when the great outcry for love arose and would be heard, that Hannah recognised how painfully, piteously young she was still.

And yet in one sense this love was as different from the love of her girlhood as Autumn is from Spring. It did not seem in the least to interfere with the memory of Arthur. True, she had been only eighteen when she last saw his dear face, scarcely twenty when he died; but Hannah was one of that sort of people with whom to be 'off with the old love and on with the new' was a thing not needing argument, it was simply impossible. She had never dropped willingly a single thread of love in her life; the threads which God had broken here were only temporarily invisible; she could follow them still, in spirit, to the unseen land. Yet to her intensely constant nature any change was at first a kind of pain.

'Arthur! Arthur!' she sighed, and kept turning his ring round and round upon her finger. 'You are not angry with me? I could not help it. He needed me so!'

Yes, there was the secret, as it is of so many marriages, so many lasting loves: people become necessary to one another before they are aware. Propinquity, circumstances, do a great deal; but more is done by the strong, gradual, inner want—the sympathy which grows day by day, the trust which, feeling its way step to step, may be slow of advancing, but never retrogrades. Whether such a love be as perfect as the real passion, 'first-born and heir to all'—the lovely dream



of youth and maidenhood, which, when man or woman ever realises and possesses it, must be the crown of existence—I do not say. But such as it is, it is a pure, noble, and blessed affection, the comfort and refreshment of many lives—that is, if they accept it as it is, and do not try to make it what it never can be, nor seek to find among the August roses the violets of the Spring.

‘Arthur! Arthur!’ Hannah sighed once again, and then said to herself in a solemn, steadfast, resolute tenderness, the name she had never yet uttered, even in thought, for it seemed like an unconscious appropriation of him—‘My Bernard!’

And the word was a vow. Not exactly a love-vow, implying and expecting unlimited happiness—she scarcely thought of happiness at all—but a vow that included all duties, all tendernesses, all patience; a pledge such as a woman makes to the man unto whom she is prepared to resign herself and her own individuality, for life.

It was a change so sudden, total, and overwhelming that beyond it she could at first see nothing, did not recognise the future as a real thing at all. She went to sleep like a person half-bewildered, and woke up in the morning confused still, until Rosie came in as usual, while Tannie was dressing, requiring all sorts of ‘pitty sings to play wid’ in her usual sweet exactingness. Then slowly, slowly, Hannah realised all.

‘My darling! my darling! my own for ever!’ cried she, snatching up Rosie in a passion of tenderness. And not even Bernard’s fond look of last night, as he put to her and she answered that solemn question, thrilled to Hannah’s heart more than the embrace of the child.

Carrying the little one in her arms, she went downstairs and met him in the hall. A meeting just the same as on all mornings, except that there was a glow, a radiance almost in his countenance which she had

never seen before, and his voice, whenever he addressed her, had a reverential affectionateness which gave meaning to his lightest words. Also he called her 'Hannah'—never 'Aunt Hannah' again.

There is a pathos in all love. What must there be, then, in a love such as this, conceived in spite of fate, carried on through all hindrances, at last betrayed rather than confessed, and when confessed having to meet the dark future, in which its sole reward must be the mere act of loving? These two, forbidden by destiny to woo and marry like ordinary people, were nevertheless not a melancholy pair of lovers. No outward eye would have recognised them as lovers at all. By no word or act did Bernard claim his rights, the happy rights of a man to whom a woman has confessed her affection; he neither kissed her nor said one fond word to her. No servant coming in and out, nor even the innocent little tell-tale who was just at that age when she was sure to communicate everything to everybody, could have suspected anything, or betrayed anything, concerning these two, who knew they were henceforward not two, but one till death.

They were neither afraid nor ashamed. At the first sight of Bernard every lurking feeling of shame went out of Hannah's heart. Every thought, too, as if her loving the living were a wrong to the dead. Arthur's ring was still on her finger, Rosa's sweet face still smiled from over the mantel-piece upon the two whom in life she had loved best in the world, and Rosa's child clung fondly unto Tannie's faithful breast. Hannah shrank from none of these things, nor did Bernard. More than once that morning he had named, incidentally but unhesitatingly, his child's mother, calling her, as he always did from this day forward, 'our' Rosa; and though he was so quiet he went about cheerfully as he had not done for long, like a man who has recovered his own self-respect

and his interest in life ; to whom the past brings no pain, and the future no dread.

Passion is a weak thing, but love, pure love, is the strongest thing on earth, and these lovers felt it to be so. Though neither said a word beyond the merest domestic common-place, there was a peace, a restfulness about them both, which each saw in the other, and rejoiced to see. It was like calm after storm—ease after pain. No matter how soon the storm arose, the pain began again ; the lull had been real while it lasted.

They began arranging their day's work as usual, work never very light ; this Monday there seemed more to settle than ever.

'What should I do without you?' said Bernard. 'Such a wise, sensible, practical woman as you are ! always busy, and yet forgetting nothing. Stay, have you forgotten we were to dine at the Grange to-night?'

The invitation had come a week ago, and Adeline had repeated it last evening. Still Hannah hesitated.

'Must we go? Nay, ought we?'

'Why not? Because of—of what we said last night? That is a stronger reason than ever why we should go. We should not shrink from society. I am not ashamed of myself. Are you?'

'No.' She dropped her head, faintly blushing ; but when she saw that Bernard held his erect, she took courage.

'What Lady Rivers says does not apply to Melville Grange. My sister is mistress in her own house, and Melville, though he is fond enough of his sisters-in-law, is not really so likely to be influenced by his mother-in-law as by his own mother. She is a very good and wise woman, Mrs. Melville. I wanted to have a little talk with her to-night.'

Hannah looked uneasy. 'Oh, be careful ! I would much rather not a word were said to any one.'

'About ourselves? No ; I have not the slightest

intention of telling anybody. It is our own affair entirely, till we see our way clear to—to the rightful end; for Hannah, I need not say that must come about if it be possible. I cannot live without you'

He spoke in a low tone, grasping her hand. He was not nearly so calm as she; yet even Hannah felt her heart beating, her colour coming and going. Is it only for young lovers, passionate, selfish, uncontrolled, that society must legislate? or criminal lovers, who exact an excited pity, and are interesting just because they are criminal? Is there no justice, no tenderness, for those who suffer and are silent, doing no wrong?

'We will never do anything wrong,' said he. 'We will neither fly in the face of the law nor offend my own people, if possible; but we will be married if we can. I must take legal advice on the subject. Till then, let all go on as usual. Is it not better so?'

'Yes.'

They stood at the hall-door, Rosie sitting queen-like on Tannie's arm, to watch papa away. He kissed his little girl, and then just touched with his lips the hand that held her. No more. No love-embrace—no thought of such a thing; but there was a gleam in his eyes, like the January sun through the winter trees, showing that Summer days might yet come.

It warmed Hannah's heart with a quiet, serious joy, as she went through her household duties, especially those which concerned the child. She had her darling with her almost all day, and never had Rosie's innocent companionship been so satisfying and so sweet.

'So for the father's sake the child was dear,  
And dearer was the father for the child.'

Among the magnificent literature in which Tannie and Rosie indulged happened to be an illustrated fairy-tale book, wherein the usual cruel stepmother figured

in great force. And she herself should be a step-mother, perhaps, one day! In the glee of her heart Hannah laughed—actually laughed—to think how different fiction often was from reality.

Bernard came home only just in time to dress, and they did not meet till he put her into the carriage. Half their drive passed almost in silence, but by-and-bye Bernard spoke in a business-like way, saying he meant to go up to London, and take counsel's opinion there. It would not do to consult any one here. On what subject he did not say, but it was easy to guess.

‘Mrs. Melville might give me information—only, of course, I could not ask her direct. I can only find it out in a quiet way, as I have already found out a good deal. It seems till 1835 these marriages were legal—at any rate not illegal, unless an ecclesiastical suit should find them so—which it never did. It was in 1835 that was passed the ridiculous bill confirming all marriages prior to 31st August, and making those unlawful which happened on or after the 1st September.’

‘Then they are unlawful now?’ said Hannah, feeling silence worse than speech.

‘Nobody seems quite to understand whether they are or not. On the Continent, nay, in every country except ours, they are certainly legal. Our colonies have again and again passed a bill legalising such marriages, and the mother country has thrown it out. Many persons go abroad to be married, come back again and live unblamed; but they risk a good deal, and’—he hesitated—‘it is not for themselves alone.’

Hannah drew back into her dark corner, glad of the darkness. It was a strange and sore position for any woman to be placed in. Betrothed, yet having none of the honours and happinesses of an affianced bride; sitting beside her lover, yet treated by him in no loverlike fashion, and feeling nothing of the shy frankness which makes the new tie so sweet; obliged

to talk with him about their marriage and its possibilities with a mournful candour that would have been most painful to bear, save for her own strong, innocent heart and Bernard's exceeding delicacy:—she found her lot as humiliating as it was hard.

Yet she had never loved him so dearly, never recognised how well he deserved her love, as when, after their long, dark drive, he said tenderly, 'Now, Hannah, we will forget for the time all these bitter-nesses—except the love, except the love,' handed her out into the bright hall at the Grange, and entered the drawing-room with her on his arm, as at Easterham dinner-parties had been their custom always.

This was a state dinner. All the Moat-House people were there, and Mr. Morecamb too. Hannah did not know whether it was pure accident or refinement of ill-nature, but Mr. Morecamb was assigned to her at dinner, and she had no resource but to obey. The poor man evidently knew his fate, and was bearing it like a man. It was either one of the *contretemps* in which the unlucky victims can only submit and make the best of things, or done on purpose; but in either case there was no remedy.

Bernard had been placed far down the table; but whether or not, Hannah knew he could be no shield to her—rather the contrary. She must keep up her own dignity—trust for protection solely to herself. And a nervous consciousness made her look sedulously away from him all dinner-time. Nay, as she passed him in the procession of ladies afterwards, she kept her eyes fixed so steadily on the ground, that Bertha asked satirically 'if she and Bernard had been quarrelling?'

During dinner she had been comparatively safe, even with Mr. Morecamb beside her; afterwards there gathered over her the vague coldness which women always know how to show towards another woman who is somehow 'under a cloud.' The Rivers family in-

dicated it most of all. Scarcely any one of them addressed her except Adeline.

‘Don’t mind it,’ whispered the latter, following Hannah into a corner. ‘We’ll stand by you, and people will see you here. Of course it is awkward, very awkward. Easterham is talking about you so much, and my family, of all things, dislike being talked about. But I have thrown dust in everybody’s eyes by giving you at dinner to Mr. Morecanib. Couldn’t you like him? Such a nice old fellow, and so fond of you!’

Hannah shook her head, smiling drearily. It was idle to take offence at silly little Adeline, who never meant any harm.

She sat down, turning over the leaves of a photograph-book, and bade her young hostess go back to her other guests.

‘No, no, I mean to stay with you. I don’t feel as my family do. I can’t see why they should make such a fuss even if Bernard did want to marry you. People used to do it—my respected mother-in-law, for instance. And sisters-in-law are not real sisters; never ought to be. If the law made this quite clear, a man wouldn’t dare go philandering with them in his wife’s life-time. Now—oh, dear!—it’s so convenient. He can’t marry them, so he may flirt with them as much as ever he likes. It’s all right, and the wife can’t say a word. But she may feel for all that.’

Adeline spoke bitterly; having evidently quite slidden away from the case in point, not thinking of Hannah at all; so there was no need to answer her except in a general way.

‘Yes, I daresay it is at times a little vexing. But I am afraid I do not understand jealousy. I cannot comprehend how, after people are once married, they feel the smallest interest in anybody else. And the conjugal fidelity which has only the law to secure it must be a very shallow thing.’

‘You ridiculously simple woman! Well, perhaps you are right. Jealousy is silly. We can’t stop every young lady out of our house because our husband may one day have the chance of marrying her. Let him! When we are dead and gone we shall not care. Only don’t let her come and steal him from us while we are alive. It’s all a sham, this nonsense about sisters,’ added she, stamping with her white satin shoes, and tearing to pieces her hot-house roses. ‘And, like you, I am beginning to hate shams. Hannah Thelluson, let us be friends.’

‘We always were friends, I hope,’ said Hannah gently, pitying the young wife, whose skeleton in the house had been so unconsciously betrayed. She was more than sorry, rather angry, when, as the evening wore on, and the gentlemen came in, Herbert Melville scarcely noticing his sickly, unlovely Adeline, devoted himself entirely to her blooming sisters, especially to Bertha; who, a born coquette, seemed to enjoy the triumph amazingly. The law which barred some people from happiness, did not seem to furnish any security for the happiness of others. Hannah almost forgot herself in her pity for Adeline.

And yet she could have pitied herself too—a little. It was hard to sit there, tabooed, as it were, by that silent ignoring which women understand so well, and hear the others talking pleasantly round her. No one was actually uncivil; the Melvilles were almost obtrusively kind; but there the coldness was, and Hannah felt it. Such a new thing, too; for, in her quiet way, she had been rather popular than not in society; she had such gentle tact in fishing out all the shy, or grim, or stupid people, and warming them up into cheerfulness. But now even they quietly slipped away, and left her alone.

It was a heavy night. She asked herself more than once how many more of the like she should have to bear, and if she could bear them? Did Bernard see



it or feel it? She could not tell. He came in late. She saw him talking to Mrs. Melville, and afterwards to Lady Rivers; then trying his utmost to be pleasant to everybody. She was so proud always of the sweet nature he had, and the simple unconscious charm of his manner in society. But in the pauses of conversation he looked inexpressibly sad; and when they got into the carriage, and were alone together, she heard him sigh so heavily that, if his people had been all night long pricking her to death with pins and needles, Hannah would not have complained. The very fact of complaint seemed a certain humiliation.

They scarcely exchanged a word all the drive home; but he took and held fast her hand. There was something in the warm clasp that comforted her for everything.

‘Dear,’ he whispered, as he lit her candle and bade her good night, which he did as soon as possible, ‘it is a hard lot for both of us. Can you bear it?’

‘I think I can.’

And so for some days she thought she could. She had that best balm for sorrow—a busy life; each hour was as full of work as it would hold; no time for dreaming or regrets, scarcely even for love except in the form wherein fate had brought love to her—calm, domestic, habitual—scarcely distinguishable from friendship even yet. She and Bernard did all their customary business together day by day. They had become so completely one in their work that it would have been difficult to do otherwise. Nor did she wish it. She was happy only to be near him, to help him, to watch him fulfilling all his duties, whatever bitterness lay underneath them. That pure joy which a woman feels in a man’s worthiness of love, keener than even her sense of the love he gives her, was Hannah’s to the core. And then she had her other permanent bliss—the child.

Women—good women, too—have sometimes married a man purely for the sake of his children; and Hannah never clasped Rosie in her arms without understanding something of that feeling. Especially on the first Sunday after the change had come—the great change, of which not an atom showed in their outward lives, but of which she and Bernard were growing more and more conscious, every day. This bright morning, when the sun was shining, and the crocuses all aflame across the garden, and a breath of Spring stirring through the half-budded lilac tree, it might perhaps have been hard for them to keep up that gentle reticence of manner to one another except for the child.

Rosie was a darling child. Even strangers said so. The trouble she gave was infinitesimal, the joy unlimited. Father and aunt were accustomed to delight together over the little opening soul, especially on a Sunday morning. They did so still. They talked scarcely at all, neither of the future nor the past; but simply accepted the present, as childhood accepts it, never looking beyond. Until, in the midst of their frolic—while papa was carrying his little girl on his back round and round the table, and Tannie was jumping out after them at intervals in the character of an imaginary wolf, Rosie screaming with ecstasy, and the elders laughing almost as heartily as the child—there came a note from the Moat-House.

Mr. Rivers read it, crushed it furiously in his hand, and threw it on the back of the fire. Then, before it burnt, he snatched it out again.

‘My poor Hannah! But you ought to read it. It will hurt you—still you ought to read it. There must never be any concealments between us two.’

‘No.’

Hannah took the letter, but did not grow furious—rather calmer than before. She knew it was only the beginning of the end.

‘MY DEAR BERNARD,—

‘Your father wishes particularly to talk with you to-day, as poor Austin, we hear, is rather worse than usual. You will of course come in to lunch, and remain to dinner.

‘I perceive that, in spite of my earnest advice, Miss Thelluson is still an inmate of your household. Will you suggest to her that I am sorry our pew will be full, and our dinner-table also, to-day?

‘I wish you were more amenable to the reasonings of your family, but remain, nevertheless,

‘Your affectionate mother,

‘A. RIVERS.’

‘Well?’ Bernard said, watching her.

Hannah drooped her head over Rosie’s hair; the child had crept to her knees, and was looking with wide blue eyes up at Tannie.

‘It is but what I expected—what she before declared her intention of doing.’

‘But do you recognise all it implies—all it will result in?’

‘Whatever it be, I am prepared’

‘You do not know the worst,’ Bernard said, after a pause. ‘I found it out yesterday by getting counsel’s opinion on the strict law of the case; but I had not courage to tell you.’

‘Why not? I thought we were to have no secrets.’

‘Oh, we men are such cowards; I am, anyhow. But will you hear it now? It will be such a relief to talk to you.’

‘Talk then,’ said Hannah, with a pale smile. ‘Stop; shall we have time? It will be twenty minutes yet before the church bells begin ringing.’

For she knew that the wheels of life must go on, though both their hearts were crushed on the way.

‘Five minutes will be enough for all I have to tell you. Only take the child away.’

Hannah carried away little Rosie, who clung frantically to her fond paradise in Tannie's arms, and was heard wailing dolorously overhead for a good while.

'See! even that baby cannot bear to part with you. How then shall I?' cried Bernard passionately; and then, bidding her sit down, began giving her in words exact and brief the result of his inquiries.

These confirmed all he had said himself once before, in the case of Grace and James Dixon. Of the law, as it now stood, there could be no possible doubt. No marriage with a deceased wife's sister, whether celebrated here or abroad, would be held valid in England. No woman so married had any legal rights, no children could inherit. Thus even in cases where the marriage was known to have existed, and the wife had borne the husband's name for years, he, dying intestate, his estates had been known to lapse to the Crown; but then the Crown, with a curious recognition of the difference between law and equity, had been usually advised to return them piecemeal, under the guise of a free gift, to the children, who otherwise would have been the undisputed heirs.

'Heirship—money! it seems all to hinge upon that,' said Hannah, a little bitterly.

'Yes; because property is the test upon which the whole legal question turns. If I had been without ties—say a poor clerk upon a hundred and fifty a-year (I wish I had)—we might have set sail by the next steamer to America, and lived there happy to the end of our days; for England is the only country which does not recognise such marriages as ours. Some countries—France and Germany, for instance—require a special permission to marry; but this gained, society accepts the union at once. Now, with us—oh, Hannah, how am I to put it to you?—this would do no good. As I said before, the misery would not end with ourselves.'

'Would it affect Rosie?'

‘Your heart is full of Rosie. No; but she is only a girl, and the Moat-House is entailed in the male line. Austin is slowly dying. I am the last of my race. Do you understand?’

She did at last. Her face and neck turned scarlet, but she did not shrink. It was one of the terrible necessities of her position that she must not shrink from anything. She saw clearly that never, according to the law of England, could she be Bernard’s wife. And if not, what would she be? If she had children, what would they be? And his estates lay in England, and he was the last of his line.

‘I perceive,’ she faltered. ‘No need to explain further. You must not think of me any more. To marry me would ruin you.’

Wild and miserable as his eyes were—fierce with misery—the tears rushed into them.

‘My poor Hannah, my own unselfish Hannah, you never think for a moment that it would also ruin you.’

It was true, she had not thought of herself; only of him. A clergyman, prepared to break the canon law; a man of family and position, running counter to all social prejudices; a son, dutiful and fondly attached, opposing his father’s dearest wishes. The mental struggle that he must have gone through before there ever dawned upon him the possibility of marrying her, struck Hannah with a conviction of the depth of his love, the strength of his endurance, such as she had never believed in before.

‘Oh, Bernard!’ she cried, calling him by his name for the first time, and feeling—was it also for the first time?—how entirely she loved him—‘Bernard, you must never think of marrying me; we must part.’

‘Part!’ and he made as if he would have embraced her, but restrained himself. ‘We will discuss that question by-and-bye. At present, hear the rest which I have to tell.’

He then explained, with a calmness which in so impulsive a man showed how strong was the self-control he was learning to exercise, that since 1835 many dissentients from the law then passed had tried to set it aside; that almost every session a Bill to this effect was brought into the House of Commons, fiercely discussed there, passed by large majorities, and then carried to the Upper House, where the Peers invariably threw it out. Still in the minority were a few very earnest in the cause.

‘I know; Lord Dunsmore is one of them.’

‘Yes; I had forgotten; I seem to be forgetting everything!’ and Bernard put his hand wearily to his head. ‘I met Lady Dunsmore in London, and she asked me no end of questions about you. She is very fond of you, I think.’

‘Is she?’

‘She wanted to know if you would come and stay with her and bring Rosie; but I said I could not spare either of you. And then she looked at me inquisitively. She is a very shrewd, clever, good woman, and a strong ally on our side. For it must be our side, Hannah, whatever my people say, whatever I might have said myself once. Any law that creates a crime is mischievous and cruel. Even if I had no personal concern in the matter, it is a wrong, and I would fight against it as such.’

‘The Riverses were ever fighters, you know,’ said Hannah, watching him with a sad, tender smile; and more than ever there darkened down upon her all he was giving up for her sake.

‘But to come to the point, Hannah. I have told you all the ill, now hear the good. Every year public feeling is advancing; this year the Bill is to be brought in again. Its adherents are ready for a good hard fight, as usual; but this time they hope to win. And if they win—then—then——’

He seized her hands, and clasped them passion-

ately. It was not the dreamy love-making of a boy in his teens—of her lost Arthur, for instance, over whose utmost happiness hung the shadow of early death—it was the strong passion of a man in the midst of life, with all his future before him—a future that needed a wife's help to make it complete; and Hannah knew it. For a moment, sad, pale, white-lily-like as she was, there came a flush, rose-red, into her cheeks, and to her heart an eager response to the new duties, the new joys; then she shrank back within herself. It all seemed so hopeless, or with such a slender thread of hope to cling to; yet he clung to it.

‘I will never give in,’ he said, ‘if I have to wait for years. I will marry you if I possibly can; I will never marry any other woman. You shall not be troubled or harmed—not more than I must necessarily harm you, my poor love! simply because you are my love. But mine you must and shall be some day. You hear me, Hannah?’

For she stood passive and bewildered—any one might have thought she did not care, until she lifted up her eyes to him. Then he had no doubt at all.

‘Oh, give me one kiss, Hannah, to last me all these months and years. It will not hurt you—it is not wrong.’

‘No,’ and she gave it; then with a great sigh they both sat down.

The church bells began to ring. ‘I must go,’ Bernard said. ‘But first—what are we to do? Will you go to church to-day?’

‘I must. If I sit in the free-seats or in the aisle, I must go to church. It is God's house; He will not drive me from it; He knows I have done nothing wrong.’ And she wept a little, but not much.

‘You are right; we have not done anything wrong, and we ought not to act as if we had. Then—will you come with me?’

‘No; I had rather go alone,’ said Hannah gently. ‘I will bear everything alone, so far as I can.’

‘What do you mean? What do you wish?’

‘That you should in all things do your duty without considering me. Go to the Moat-House, as they desire. If they do not mention me, do not you. What does it matter? They cannot harm me—not much. And to break with them would be terrible for you. Keep friends with your own people to the last.’

‘You truly wish that?’

‘I do. Now go. Good-bye, and God bless you, Bernard!’

‘God bless you, my Hannah!’

And with that mutual blessing they parted.

## CHAPTER XI.

THE climaxes of life come only occasionally. When borne upon the height of them we think we can endure anything; all beside them seem so small. But when they are over, and we have sunk back into the level of every-day life, it is different. The sword-stroke we hardly felt; the daily pin-pricks drive us wild. It is sure to be so; we cannot help it.

At first Hannah thought she could. After that Sunday morning she and Bernard talked no more together—why should they? Their minds were quite made up that both love and marriage were lawful to them—if attainable. But seeing that an immediate union was impossible, and a separation almost equally so, on account of the child, they spoke of neither again, but tacitly determined to go on living together as before—in no way like lovers—but as like brother and sister as was practicable; both for their own sakes, and for the sake of outward eyes.



This decided, Hannah thought her way would be clear. It was only a question of time and patient waiting. Any year the Bill might be passed, and their marriage made possible. In the meantime it was no worse than a long engagement; better, perhaps, since they had the daily comfort of one another's society. At least Hannah felt it so, and was cheerful and content. What Bernard felt he did not say—but he was not always content; often very dull, irritable, and desponding. At such times Hannah had great patience with him—the patience which had now the additional strength of knowing that it was to be exercised for life.

It was most needed, she found, after he had been to the Moat-House—whither, according to her wish, he steadily went, and went alone. Had she been his wife—or even openly his betrothed—she might, in spite of all she had said, have resented this; but, now, what could she resent? She had no rights to urge. So she submitted. As to what passed on these visits, she asked no questions, and he gave no information. She never saw Bernard's people now; except on Sundays, with a distance of a dozen pews between them. Young Mrs. Melville still called—punctiliously and pointedly—leaving her pair of greys standing outside the gate; but she excused herself from asking Hannah to the Grange, because if the girls were there it would be so very awkward.

'And the girls are always there,' added she, querulously. 'I can't call my house my own—or my husband's either. Hannah, when you marry, you'll be thankful that you've got no sisters.'

Hannah smiled. She saw that of the real truth of her position with regard to Mr. Rivers Adeline guessed nothing. It was best so.

As weeks passed another change gradually came.

Invitations—the fear of which had sometimes perplexed her; for how should she meet the Moat-House

family, even upon neutral ground?—almost totally ceased. Her neighbours left off calling—that is, her grand neighbours; the humbler ones still sought her; but she fancied she read in their eyes a painful curiosity—a still more painful compassion, especially when they met her and Bernard together—a chance which occurred but seldom now. For he, too, seemed to have a nervous dread of being seen with her, and avoided her so much that she would often have thought he had forgotten every word that had passed between them, save for the constant mindfulness, the continual watchful care, which a man never shows except to the one woman he loves best in the world.

Yet sometimes, even having so much, made the weak heart crave for a little—a very little more; just a word or two of love; an evening now and then of their old frank intercourse—so safe and free: but neither ever came. Bernard seemed to make it a point of honour that, whatever people chose to say, they should be given no data upon which to come to the smallest conclusion. Within, as without the house, all the world might have heard every word he said to Miss Thelluson.

Whatever suspicion was whispered about the village, it rose to no open scandal. Everybody came to church as usual, and no one applied to Mr. Rivers's bishop to restrain him from preaching because he retained as his housekeeper a lady whom the law persisted in regarding as his sister. But the contradiction was that, in spite of her being counted his 'sister,' people did talk, and would talk; and, of course, the sharpest lash of their tongues fell, not upon the man, but upon the woman.

Slowly, slowly, Hannah became aware that every servant in the house, every family in the parish, kept an eye upon her, observing, condemning, sympathising, defending—all by turns—but never leaving her alone, till she felt like the poor camel in the desert, whose

lying gaze sees in the horizon that faint black line coming nearer and nearer—the vultures which are to pick her bones. She would have gone frantic sometimes—brave woman as she was—in the utter impossibility of fighting against the intangible wrong, had it not been for the child.

Rosie became not only her darling, but her friend. She had now almost no other companion, and wanted none. All grown-up people seemed worldly and shallow, dull and cold, compared with the pure little soul fresh out of heaven—which Heaven itself had sent to comfort her. As Rosie's English increased they two held long conversations together—very monosyllabic certainly, and upon the simplest of topics—'bow-wows,' 'gee-gees,' and so on—yet quite comprehensible, and equally interesting to both. For is not a growing soul the most interesting and lovely, as well as most solemn sight, in all this world? Hannah sometimes stood in awe and wonder at the intelligence of the little woman of three years old.

They two understood one another perfectly, and loved one another as even real mother and child do not always love. For never in all her little life had Rosie heard a harsher word than, 'Oh, Rosie—Tannie so sorry!' which sufficed to melt her at once into the most contrite tears. Pure contrition—with no fear of punishment—for she had never been punished. To her innocent, happy heart, no harmless joy had ever been denied, no promise ever broken. She knew that, and rested in her little ark of love as content and safe as a nautilus in its shell, swimming over the troubled waters of poor Tannie's lot like a visible angel of consolation.

Day by day that lot was growing more hard to bear, until at last chance brought it to a climax.

One forenoon, just before Mr. Rivers was going out, there drove up to the House on the Hill a pretty pony carriage and pair of greys, and out of it stepped

a little, bright, active, pretty woman—the Countess of Dunsmore.

‘I knew I should surprise you,’ cried she, kissing Hannah on both cheeks, and telling her how well she was looking; which she was, in the sudden pleasure of the meeting. ‘But I wanted to surprise you. We are visiting at Highwood Park, Mr. Rivers, and I met your sisters there at dinner, you know, and promised to come and see them; but of course I came to see Miss Thelluson first. Well, my dear, and how are you? And how is your pet Rosie?’

The little Rosie answered for herself, being so greatly attracted by Lady Dunsmore’s ermine tails, and, perhaps, by her sweet motherly face, that she made friends with her immediately. But Hannah was nervous—agitated. She knew exactly the expression of that quick dark eye which saw everything, and saw through everything, whether or not the lady mentioned the result of that observation.

Bernard, too, was a little constrained. He knew Lady Dunsmore slightly, and evidently was not aware that Hannah knew her so well; for Hannah was not apt to boast of her friends, especially when they happened to have titles. Yet the sight of her warmed her heart, and she had hundreds of questions to ask about her old pupils, and endless reminiscences of her old life with them—so peaceful and contented. Yet would she have had it back, rather than the life now? No!—unhesitatingly no!

She felt this when, having put the blithe little countess into her carriage, Bernard returned. He walked heavily down the garden, in deep thought.

‘A charming person, Lady Dunsmore; and a warm, steady friend of yours, Hannah.’

‘Yes, she was always kind to me.’

‘Kinder than others have been since,’ said Mr. Rivers, sighing. ‘Would you like to go and pay her the long visit she asks for?’

‘No.’

‘And what shall you do about that invitation she brought you, to go with my sisters to dine at High-wood Lodge?’

‘What can I do, except not go? To explain is impossible.’

‘Yes.’—After a moment’s thought Mr. Rivers went on—‘Hannah, may I say a word? Evidently my people have been quite silent to Lady Dunsmore about you; she expected to meet you at the Moat-House. They perhaps are sorry, and would be glad of an opportunity to atone. May I speak to them?’

‘Stop a minute. What shall you say? For I will have nothing said that would humiliate me.’

Bernard looked tenderly at the flushed face. ‘My love, any man humiliates himself who for a moment allows the woman he has chosen to be lightly esteemed. Be satisfied; I shall keep up your dignity as if it were my own; for it is my own.’

‘Thank you.’ But there was only pride—no sweetness in the words. They made him turn back at once.

‘Oh, Hannah, how long is this state of things to last? How can we bear it if it lasts very long?’

She replied nothing.

‘Sometimes I ask myself, why should we bear it? when our consciences are satisfied, when the merest legal form stands between us and our happiness. You do not feel the suspense as I do; I see that; but do you know it sometimes almost drives me mad that I cannot marry you?’

His agitation was so extreme that Hannah was frightened, both for his sake and lest any servant should come in and find them thus. Oh, the misery of that false life they led! oh, the humiliation of concealment!

‘Why should all the world be happy but me? Why should that foolish old Morecamb—but I for-

get, I never told you he is going to be married. I tell you nothing; I never have a chance of an hour's quiet talk with you.'

'Why not? It would make me much happier.'

Those pure, sad, beseeching eyes—he turned away from them; he could not bear them.

'Don't ask me. I dare not. If I saw much of you I would not answer for myself. I might'—he laughed—'I might even horrify you by asking you to go abroad and get married, as old Mr. Melville did. But I will not; no, I will not. And if I would, you would not consent?'

'No.'

'I was sure of it. One might as well attempt to move the pyramids as Hannah Thelluson after she had once said No.'

His manner was so rough, so reckless, that it pained her almost more than anything she had yet experienced. Was their forced unnatural kind of life injuring him? And if so, ought it to continue? And if it must be ended, was not she the one to do it?

'Bernard,' she said, 'will you come home to-night?'—for it was not the rule, but the rare exception, his staying with her of evenings. 'Then we will have one of our old talks together, and perhaps we may settle something; or feel, when we look things calmly in the face, that they are not so dreadful as they seem. Now go. Hark! there is Rosie calling over the staircase for papa.'

He had a real fatherly heart now; this young man, from whom, in his full flush of youth, life's best blessing, a wife's love, was first taken, and then tantalisingly denied. He snatched at the joys still left to him, and clasping his little girl in his arms, pressed his hot forehead upon Rosie's breast.

But all that day his words and tones rang warningly through Hannah's heart. This could not last—

it was against human nature. So much, yet so little as they were to one another. They *must* be more—or less. Should she leave him; for a time perhaps? or should she go quite away? She knew not what to do. Nor what to say, when he should come home to her to-night, and appeal to her, with the innocent half-childlike expression his face sometimes wore, for comfort, counsel. How could she give either? She needed both herself.

And when their formal dinner was over, and they sat together in their pleasant drawing-room, with the yellow twilight glimmering outside—for summer was coming back again, the third summer since Rosa died,—life seemed to Hannah so hard, so hard!

She gave him his tea almost in silence, and then he proposed a stroll in the garden, up and down the front walk, which was in full view of the house. Into the sheltered green alley—the ‘Lovers’ Walk’—these two poor lovers never went; never dared to go.

But such happiness as they could get they took, and Hannah had risen to fetch her shawl, when they saw entering the gate the last apparition they expected to see—Lady Rivers. For months she had not crossed their threshold. But then—Hannah would have been more than mortal not to have remembered this—it had been crossed that morning by the Countess of Dunsmore.

Lady Rivers was by no means a stupid woman. Her faculty for discovering which way the wind blew, and trimming her sails accordingly, amounted to absolute genius. Not being thin-skinned herself she never looked for that weakness in others; so had under all circumstances the most enviable coolness and self-possession. The graceful air with which she entered by the French window, kissed Bernard in motherly greeting, and shook hands with Miss Thelluson as if she had seen her only the day before, was most inimitable.

‘How comfortable you look here! It is quite a

pleasure to see you. May I ask for a cup of tea? Your tea always used to be so good, Miss Thelluson. And you had a visit from Lady Dunsmore? So had we afterwards. What a charming person she is; and a great friend of yours, I understand.'

Hannah assented.

'I must congratulate you; for a lady, especially a single lady, is always judged by her choice of friends.'

'I did not choose Lady Dunsmore for my friend; I was only her children's governess.'

'Indeed! Anyhow, she has evidently a great regard for you. By-the-bye, does she know anything of the—the little uncomfortableness between us lately, which, as I came to say to-night, is, I trust, entirely a thing of the past? Don't speak, Bernard. In fact this visit is not meant for you. I came over to tell Miss Thelluson of something which—as Mr. Morecamb was the cause of difference between her and me'—(Hannah opened her eyes)—'will, I trust, heal it. He is engaged to be married to my eldest daughter.'

Hannah offered the customary good wishes.

'It is indeed a most suitable marriage, and we are quite pleased at it. So now, my dear, let bygones be bygones. Will you come with Bernard to meet Lady Dunsmore at dinner on Friday?'

Never was there a more composed putting of the saddle upon the wrong horse, ignoring everything that it was advisable to ignore, for the sake of convenience. And many a woman, prudent and worldly-wise, would have accepted it as such. But, unfortunately, Hannah was not a prudent woman. Against certain meannesses her spirit revolted with a fierceness that slipped all self-control.

She glanced towards Bernard, but his eyes were turned away; he had the moody, uncomfortable look of a man dragged unwillingly into women's wars. Thrown back upon herself, alone, quite alone, pride.



whispered that she must act as if she were alone, as if his love were all a dream, and she once more the solitary, independent Hannah Thelluson, who, forlorn as she was, had always been able till now to hold her own, had never yet experienced an insult or submitted tamely to an injury. She would not now.

‘I thank you, Lady Rivers, for the trouble you have taken, but it will be quite impossible for me to accept your invitation.’

Lady Rivers looked amazed. That any concession she made should not be joyfully received, that any invitation to the Moat-House should not be accepted with avidity; the thing was ridiculous. She paused a moment as if doubting she had heard aright, and then appealed to Bernard.

‘Pray assure Miss Thelluson that she need not hesitate. I have watched her narrowly of late, and am quite sure I was mistaken in any little prejudices I might have had. I and the girls will be delighted to see her. Do persuade her to come with you.’

‘Excuse me, but I always leave Miss Thelluson to decide for herself.’

The cold voice, the indifferent manner, though she knew both were advisable and inevitable, smote Hannah to the core. That bitter position of love and no love, ties and no ties, seemed to degrade her almost as if she had been really the vile thing that some people thought her.

‘Mr. Rivers is right,’ she said. ‘I must decide for myself. You wished my visits to you to cease; I acquiesced; it will not be quite so easy to resume them. As Mr. Rivers’s sister-in-law and housekeeper I shall always be happy to see you in his house, but I fear you must excuse my coming to yours. Let us dismiss the subject. Shall I offer you a cup of tea?’

Her manner, gentle as it was, implied a resolution strong enough to surprise even Bernard. For Lady

Rivers, she coloured, even beneath her delicate rouge—but she was too prudent to take offence.

‘Thank you. Your tea, as I said, is always excellent; and perhaps when we have more attractions to offer you, we may yet see you at the Moat-House. In the meantime, I hope, Bernard, that Miss Thelluson’s absence will not necessitate yours.’

And she looked hard at him, determined to find out how he felt in the matter, and to penetrate, if possible, the exact relations between the two.

It was a critical moment. Most men, even the best of them, are, morally, very great cowards, and Bernard was no exception to the rule. Besides, Hannah was not his wife, or his betrothed—she had not even called herself his friend: she had given him no rights over her—asked no protection from him. What could he do or say? Irresolute, he looked from one to the other—excessively uncomfortable—when Hannah came to the rescue.

‘Of course my brother-in-law will go without me: we are quite independent in our proceedings. And he will explain to Lady Dunsmore—the utmost it is necessary to explain, as I never talk of my private affairs to anybody—that I do not pay many visits; I had rather stay at home with my little girl. That will be perfectly true,’ she added, her lips slightly quivering. ‘I prefer Rosie’s company to anybody’s. She loves me.’

Bernard started up, and then, fearful of having committed himself, sat down again. Lady Rivers, though evidently vexed, was equal to the situation, and met it with a dignified indifference.

‘Pray, please yourself, Miss Thelluson; no doubt you act upon your own good reasons. You are, I always understood, a lady who never changes her mind; but if you should do so, we shall be glad to see you.’ And then she passed over the matter, as too trivial to bear further discussion, and conversed in the

most amiable manner for another half-hour. Finally, with a benign 'Good evening, Miss Thelluson; I am sure Lady Dunsmore will be much disappointed at not seeing you,' she terminated the visit as if it had been any ordinary call.

Hannah was not surprised: it was the fashion of the Rivers family not to see anything they did not wish to see: the only thing that vexed her was about Bernard. He had said nothing—absolutely nothing—except telling her, when he took his hat to accompany his step-mother home, that he would be back immediately. Was he displeased with her? Did he think she had acted ill? Had she done so? Was it her duty to submit to everything for his sake? Surely not. He had no right to expect it. Was it because she loved him that she felt so bitterly angry with him?

Yet, when, sooner than she had expected, he returned, and threw himself into his chair, pale and dejected, like a man tied and bound by fate, who sees no way to free himself—the anger melted, the pity revived. He too suffered—they suffered alike—why should they reproach one another?

'So you have had your way, Hannah.' Yes, there was reproach in the tone. 'Are you quite sure you were right in what you have done?'

'Quite sure;—at least, that unless I were some other than myself, I could not have done differently.'

And then they sat, silent, in stiff coldness, until the last ray of amber twilight had faded out of the room. What a pretty room it was—just the place to be happy in—for friends, or lovers, or husband and wife, to sit and dream together in the quiet gloaming, which all happy people love—which is so dreadful to the restless or the miserable.

'We should have rung for lights,' cried Bernard, pulling violently at the bell. 'You know I hate the dark.'

And when lights came, they saw one another's faces—his burning crimson, hers pale and in tears.

'Oh, Hannah, Hannah, how miserable we are! As I said, if this goes on much longer, how shall we bear it?'

'I do not know.' Then, steeling herself against both anger and pain, 'Bernard,' she said, 'what did you wish me to do? Your family have no claim upon me, nor I upon them. We are, as things stand, mere strangers. Are they to throw me off and pick me up again when and how they choose? Am I to submit to it?'

'I did not ask you.'

'No, but you looked it. You would have liked me to go to the Moat-House.'

'Yes. I wish you to be friends with them. I want them to love you.'

'They do not love me—they only receive me on sufferance, and I will go nowhere on sufferance. I can live alone. I want no society; but where I do go I want to be loved, I want to be respected. O Bernard!' and she looked piteously in his face, 'sometimes I am tempted to say with you,—if this lasts long, how shall I ever bear it?'

'How shall I bear it? It is harder for me than you.'

'Perhaps. But you forget it was your doing, not mine.'

And then both drew back, appalled at the sharpness of their words—at the bitterness of these mutual recriminations.

Bernard held out his hand. 'Forgive me. You are right. It was I who brought all this trouble upon you, and now I have not strength to meet it—either for you or for myself. I am so miserable that it makes me wicked. Something must be done. What shall it be?'

'What indeed?'

‘Hannah, decide. Don’t look at me in that dead silence. Speak out, for I can bear it no longer. Shall we part? Or—will you marry me at once?’

He could hardly have known what he was saying, or else, in his despair, anything seemed possible to him. Not to her. She was very gentle. She did not even draw away her hands, which he had grasped: she scarcely seemed to recognise the insult he was unwittingly offering her. She only answered, sorrowfully, yet without the slightest indecision, ‘We will part.’

Three little words—but they brought Bernard to his senses immediately. He fell on his knees before her, and passionately begged her forgiveness.

‘But you do not know what I suffer. Inwardly, outwardly—life is one long torment. At the Moat-House I have no peace. They talk at me—and at you; they try every means of worming out my secret from me. But they shall not. I will hide it at all costs. People may guess what they like—but we are safe so long as they know nothing. God help me! I talk as if we were committing a deadly sin, when my love of you is the best thing—the only good thing in me.’ He looked up at Hannah, and ground his teeth. ‘It is an accursed law,’ he said. ‘A law made only for fools, or sinners; and yet it may suffice to blast both our lives.’

‘No,’ Hannah answered, ‘nothing could do that—except ourselves.’

‘A common-place truth!’ and Bernard laughed bitterly.

‘It is God’s truth though; His right and wrong are much simpler than man’s.’

‘What is right and what is wrong? for I am growing so mad I hardly know. Show me—preach to me—I used to tell you you could preach better than the clergyman. Only love me, Hannah—if there is any love in that pale, pure face of yours. Sometimes I think there is none.’

‘None—O Bernard, none?’

For a minute she stooped over him; for a minute he felt that she had not a stone for a heart. And then the strong, firm, righteous will of the woman who, however deeply loving, could die, but would not do wrong, forced itself upon him, lulling passion itself into a temporary calm. He leant his head against her; he sobbed upon her arm like a child; and she soothed him almost as if he had been a child.

‘Listen to me,’ she said. ‘We must endure—there is no help for it. It is a cruel, unjust law, but it is the law, and while it exists we cannot break it. I could not twist my conscience in any possible way so as to persuade myself to break it. No form of marriage could ever make me legally your wife.’

‘Not in England. Out of England it could.’

‘But then—as soon as we come back to England, what should I be? And if, in the years to come—O Bernard, it is impossible, impossible.’

She said no more than that—how could she? But she felt it so intensely that, had it been necessary, she would have smothered down all natural shame, and said out to him—as solemnly as if it had been a vow before God—her determination never, for any personal happiness of her own or his, to entail upon innocent children the curse of a tainted name.

‘I understand,’ Bernard replied humbly. ‘Forgive me; I ought never to have said a word about our marrying. It must not be. I must go on my way alone to the end.’

‘Not quite alone—oh, not quite alone.’

But, as if more afraid of her tenderness than of her coldness, Bernard rose, and began walking about the room.

‘You must decide—as I said; for my own judgment altogether fails me. We cannot go on living as we do: some change must be thought of; but I cannot tell what it should be.’

‘Why need it be?’ said Hannah, timidly. ‘Can we not continue as we are?’

‘No!’ A fierce, abrupt, undeniable No.

‘Then—I had better go away.’ He looked so terrified that she hastily added, ‘Only for a time, of course—till the bitterness between you and your people softens—till we can see our way a little. It must be made plain to us some day; I believe it always is to those who have innocent hearts.’

And as she sat, her hands folded on her lap, pale and sad as she looked, there was such a sweet composure in her aspect, that Bernard stopped and gazed—gazed till the peace was reflected on his own.

‘You are a saint, and I am—only a man. A very wretched man sometimes. Think for me—tell me what I ought to do.’

Hannah paused a little, and then suggested that he should, for a few weeks or so, part with Rosie and herself, and let them go, as Lady Dunsmore had earnestly wished, to pay her a visit in London.

‘Did she say so?’ said Bernard, with sensitive fear. ‘Do you think she said it with any meaning—that she has any idea concerning us?’

‘You need not be afraid even if she had,’ was the rather proud answer. Alas! how quick they were growing to take offence, even at one another! Yes, it was best to part. ‘I mean,’ Hannah added, ‘that, even if she guessed anything, it would not signify. I shall confess nothing; and I have often heard her say that a secret accidentally discovered ought to be held just as if it had never been discovered at all. Be satisfied—neither Lady Dunsmore nor I shall betray you, even to one another.’

And for a moment Hannah thought with comfort that this good woman was her friend—had grown more and more such, as absence discovered to both their common worth. It would be a relief after the

long strain to rest upon this genial feminine companionship—this warm and kindly heart.

‘She will treat me like a friend too—not like her old governess, if you are uneasy about that. Or, if you like it better, I shall be received less as poor Hannah Thelluson than as Mr. Rivers’s sister-in-law and Rosie’s aunt. I am to go about with her everywhere—she made me quite understand that. A strange, changed life for me; but my life is all so strange.’

And Hannah sighed. She felt as if she had let her oars go, and were drifted about involuntarily, she knew not whither, hardly caring whether she should ever touch land; and if she did, whether it would be as a living woman, or a creature so broken down and battered that she could neither enjoy nor suffer any more? Who could tell? Fate must decide.

Mr. Rivers listened to her silently, but full of thought—thoughts which, perhaps, she could not have followed had she tried. He was a very good man, but he was also a man of the world: he would not have been a Rivers else. He saw at once the advantage of Lady Dunsmore’s countenance—not merely because she happened to be a marquis’s daughter and an earl’s wife, but because in any society she was the sort of person whose friendship was valued and valuable. Was it human nature, or only masculine nature, that, dearly as he loved Hannah, Bernard unconsciously prized her the more because she was prized by such a woman as the Countess of Dunsmore?

‘Go, then,’ he said. ‘I will not hinder you. Pay your visit; you will be happy; and it will in many ways be a good thing.’ Then with a nervous eagerness that, in spite of her reason, pained Hannah acutely—‘When does she want you? How soon can you start?’

‘Any day, since you are so glad to get rid of me.’



‘O Hannah!’

They stood side by side, these two lovers, between whom was a barrier slight and invisible as glass, yet as impossible to be broken through without sore danger and pain. They could not break it; they dared not.

‘Things are hard for us—very hard,’ said Bernard, almost in a groan. ‘We shall be better apart—at least for a time. I meant to have gone away myself to-morrow; but if you will go instead——’

‘I cannot to-morrow. I will as soon as I can.’

‘Thank you.’

She did not sob, though her throat was choking; she only prayed. Dimly she understood what he was suffering; but she knew he suffered very much. She knew, too, that however strangely it came out,—in bitterness, anger, neglect, still the love was there, burning with the intensity of a smothered fire—all the more for being suppressed. The strength which one, at least, of them must have, she inly cried to heaven for—and gained.

‘Good-bye,’ she said; ‘for we shall not talk thus together again. It is better not.’

‘I know it is. But you love me: I need not doubt that?’

‘Yes, I love you,’ she whispered. ‘Whatever happens, remember that; and oh! keep me in your heart till death.’

‘I will,’ he said; and snatching her close, held her there, tight and fast. For one minute only; then letting her go, he bade her once more ‘good night and good-bye,’ and went away.

Three days after, Miss Thelluson, the child, and the nurse started for London together, Mr. Rivers himself seeing them off from the railway.

Rosie was in an ecstasy of delight—to be ‘going in a puff-puff with Tannie’ being to the little maid the crown of all human felicity. She kept pulling at

her papa's hand, and telling him over and over again of her bliss; and every time he stopped and listened, but scarcely answered a word. Grace, too, looked glad to go. Easterham, with James Dixon still hovering about, was a cruel place for her to live in. Hannah only looked grave and pale; but she smiled whenever her little girl smiled; and to the one or two persons who spoke to her at the railway station, where of course they were known to everybody, she spoke also in her usual gentle way.

Only when Mr. Rivers kissed Rosie, saying, 'Papa will miss his little girl,' and then turning, shook hands with her silently, Hannah grew deadly pale for a minute. That was all. The train moved off, and she saw him walking back, solitary, to his empty house.

Life has many anguishes: but perhaps the sharpest of all is an anguish of which nobody knows.

## CHAPTER XII.

As we walk along, staggering under some heavy burden, or bleeding with some unseen wound, how often do the small perplexities of life catch at us unawares, like briars, and vex us sore! Hannah, as she felt herself borne fast away from Easterham, conscious of a sense, half of relief, and half of bitter loss, was conscious, too, of a ridiculously small thing which had not occurred to her till now, and which she would never have cared for on her own account, but she did on Bernard's. This was—How would Lady Dunsmore manage to receive back into her household, as an equal and familiar friend, her *ci-devant* governess? Not that Miss Thelluson had ever been treated in the way governesses are said to be treated, though it is usually their own fault; but she had of course taken her position, both with guests and

servants, simply as the governess, and never sought to alter it. But this position Rosie's aunt and Mr. Rivers's sister-in-law could no longer suitably hold. As the cab drove up to the old family mansion in Mayfair which she knew so well, Hannah felt a sense of uncomfortableness for which she was almost angry with herself.

But it was needless. Lady Dunsmore had that true nobility which, discovering the same in others, recognises it at once, and acts accordingly. The slight difficulty which an inferior woman might have bungled over, she, with her gracious, graceful frankness, solved at once.

'You will establish Miss Thelluson and her niece in the blue rooms,' said she to the housekeeper, who, seeing who the arrival was, came forward with a pleased but patronising air. 'And see that everything is made comfortable for the child and nurse, and that my friend here shall feel as much at home as if she were in her own house.'

'Certainly, my lady.' And the wise old woman slipped quietly behind her back the hand she was extending to Miss Thelluson, till Miss Thelluson took and shook it cordially, then curtseying, Mrs. Rhodes followed her respectfully to the blue rooms, which, as everybody knew, being in communication with the countess's, were never assigned but to her favourite guests.

Thus, domestically, the critical point was settled at once. Socially, too, with equal decision.

'My friend, Miss Thelluson,' said Lady Dunsmore, introducing her at once to two ladies, aunts of Lord Dunsmore, who were in the drawing-room, and whom Hannah knew well enough, as they her, by sight. 'We are so glad to have her back among us, with her little niece. She will be such a welcome visitor, and my little girls will perfectly spoil the child, if only for her sake; they were so fond of Miss Thelluson.'

And when, to prove this, Lady Blanche and Lady

Mary came in leading little Rosie between them, and clung lovingly round their old governess's neck, Hannah felt perfectly happy—ay, even though Bernard was far away; and the remembrance of him striding forlornly to his deserted home came across her like a painful, reproachful vision. And yet it was not unnatural. The transition from perplexity to peace, from suspicion to tender respect, from indifference or coldness to warm welcoming love, was very sweet. Not until the strain was taken off her, did Hannah feel how terrible it had been.

When Lady Dunsmore, as if to prove decisively the future relation in which they were to stand, came into her room before dinner, and sitting down in her white dressing-gown before the hearth—where aunt and niece were arranging together a beautiful Noah's ark—put her hand on Miss Thelluson's shoulder, saying, 'My dear, I hope you will make yourself quite happy with us,'—Hannah very nearly broke down.

The countess stooped and began caressing the child, making solemn inquiries of her as to Noah and Mrs. Noah, their sons and sons' wives, and arranging them in a dignified procession across the rug.

'What a happy-looking little woman she is—this Rosie! And I hope her auntie is happy too? As happy as she expected to be?'

Hannah's self-control was sorely tested. This year past she had lived in an atmosphere of mingled bliss and torment, of passionate love and equally passionate coldness: been exposed to alternations of calm civility and rudeness almost approaching unkindness; but it was long since any one—any woman—had spoken to her in that frank, affectionate tone. She felt that Lady Dunsmore understood her; and when two good women once do this, they have a key to one another's hearts, such as no man, be he ever so dear, can quite get hold of.

As Hannah laid her cheek against the pretty soft

hand—none the less soft that its grasp was firm, and none the less pretty that it sparkled with diamonds—the tears came stealing down, and with them was near stealing out that secret which all the taunts in the world would never have forced from her.

But it must not be. It would compromise not herself alone. She knew well—she had long made up her mind to the fact—that, unless Bernard and she could be legally married, the relations between them must be kept strictly between their two selves. The world might guess as it chose—accuse as it chose, but not one confirmatory word must it get out of either of them. Out of her, certainly, it never should.

Therefore, she looked steadily up into her friend's face. 'Yes; my little girl makes me very happy. You were right in once saying that a woman is only half a woman till she has a child. Of her own, you meant; but it is true even if not her own. I have found it to be so. I have almost forgotten I am not Rosie's real mother.'

And then, aware of a keen inquisitiveness in Lady Dunsmore's look, Hannah blushed violently.

The countess dropped down again beside Noah's ark, and occupied herself, to Rosie's intense delight, in making a bridge over which all the animals could pass out, till the child and her new playfellow became the best of friends.

'Rosie is not much like her father, I think; and yet she has a look of him—his bright, merry look, such as he had before his trouble came. Is he getting over it at all? It is now a good while since your poor sister died.'

'Rosie's age tells it—nearly three years.'

'That is a long time for a man to mourn now-a-days. But ——' checking herself, 'I always thought Mr. Rivers very faithful-hearted, constant in his friendships, and therefore in his loves; and knowing how forlorn a man is who has once been married, I, for

one, should never blame him if he made a second choice.'

Hannah was silent; then seeing Lady Dunsmore paused for some acquiescence, she gave it in one or two meaningless words.

'And, meantime, I conclude, you remain at Easterham. Your brother-in-law evidently appreciates your society, and the blessing you are to his little girl. He said as much to me. He told me he did not know what Rosie would have done without you, and that you and she are never to be parted. Is it so?'

'He has promised me that I shall have her always.'

'Even in case of his second marriage? But I beg your pardon, I really have no right to be curious about Mr. Rivers's domestic arrangements—I know him too slightly; but yet I cannot help taking an interest in him, for his own sake as well as for yours.'

She pressed the hand she held, but asked no further questions—made no attempt whatever to find out what Hannah did not choose to tell. That noble confidence which exists among women oftener than they are given credit for, when each knows quite well the other's secret, but never betrays either to her friend or a stranger the silent, mutual trust—was henceforward established between the two. The moment Lady Dunsmore had closed the door, after talking a good while of Dunsmore topics, of her daughters, her husband, and a journey she wanted to take, only was hindered by Lord Dunsmore's determination to wait and vote for a bill that he greatly desired to see pass the House of Lords—'the Bill concerning deceased wife's sisters, in which you know he was always so interested'—Hannah felt certain that this sharp-witted little lady guessed her whole position as well as if she had told it. Also that she would keep the discovery herself, and aid in defending it from the outside world, as sacredly as if she had been pledged to inviolable

secrecy, and bound by the honour of all the Dacres and Dunsmores.

With a sense of self-respect and self-contentedness, greater than she had known for some time, Hannah dressed for dinner. Carefully too; for Bernard's sake;—since if the countess guessed anything, she would have liked her to feel that it was not so unnatural, Bernard's loving her. On his account she was glad to be held an honoured guest; glad to be met cordially, and talked to with courteous attention at dinner-time by a man like the Earl of Dunsmore, who, though rumour said his wife had made him all that he was—had roused him from the *dolce far niente* life of an idle young nobleman into a hard-working man, was a person who in any rank of life would have been useful and esteemed. And he spoke of Bernard—whom he said he had met several times when in London—with warm regard.

This was sweet to her; and equally sweet was the unconscious contrast of coming back to her old haunts under new conditions and circumstances. Often, during some pause of silence, she secretly counted up her blessings—how rich she was who had once been so poor. And when, at dessert, there stole in, hand in hand with little Lady Isabel, who had grown from a baby into a big girl since Miss Thelluson left, a certain white fairy in blue ribbons, who, looking round the dazzling room with a pretty bewilderedness, caught sight of one known face, and ran and hid her own lovingly in Tannie's lap,—Tannie's heart leaped for joy. The child—her own child!—nothing and nobody could take that treasure from her. She and Bernard might never be married; weary of long waiting, he might give up loving her, and marry some one else; but he was a man of honour—he would always leave her the child.

'Rosie does you the greatest credit,' said Lord Dunsmore, smiling at the little woman, and trying to

win her—but vainly—from Tannie's arms. 'She is a charming child.'

Hannah laughed. 'Then you will endorse the proverb about old maids' children?' said she.

Was it because he looked at her, or because of her own conscious heart, that one of those horrible sudden blushes came, and with it the sense of hypocrisy—of always bearing about with her a secret, which, sinless as she felt it was, everybody might not consider so. For even this night, though the dinner circle was small—Lord Dunsmore's known advocacy of the Bill caused it to be discussed on all sides—argued *pro* and *con* by friends and enemies, in a way that neither host nor hostess could repress without attracting attention. At length, perhaps out of wise kindness, they ceased trying to repress it, and Hannah heard the whole question of whether a man might or might not marry his deceased wife's sister argued out logically and theologically, as she had never heard it before, together with all the legal chances for and against the Bill. She could not shut her ears—she dared not: for what to all these others was a mere question of social or political opinion, was to her a matter of life and death. So she sat quiet, keeping, by a strong effort, her countenance as still as a stone, and her voice, when she had to speak, just like that of any other dinner-table guest who joined placidly, or carelessly, or combatively, in the conversation that was going on. It was best so; best to buckle on at once the armour that, in all probability, she would have to wear through life.

Lord Dunsmore seemed hopeful of his cause. He had entered into it, unlike many others, from purely impersonal motives—from a simple sense of right and justice; and he had a strong faith, he said, that the right would conquer at last.

'Not,' he added, laughing, 'that I want to compel every man to marry his sister-in-law, as some people seem to think I do; I am sure I have not the slightest



wish ever to marry mine ! But I consider all restrictions upon marriage made by neither God nor nature, a mistake and a wrong. And any law which creates a false and unnatural position between man and woman is an equal wrong. Let there be no shams. Let a man have his natural mother, sister, wife, but no anomalous relationships which, pretending to all, are in reality none of the three.

‘And,’ said Lady Dunsmore, mischievously, ‘such is the nature of man, that when all these pretty pretences were broken down, and a man must either marry a lady or have nothing to say to her, I believe he would choose the latter course. You are such contradictory creatures, you men, that I suspect, as soon as all of you might marry your wives’ sisters, you would none of you desire to do it ! But, come, we ladies have had enough of the Marriages Bill, though everybody must put up with it in this house ; for when my husband gets a hobby he rides it to death. I ride with him, too, on this one,’ she added, as stepping aside to let her matron guests pass into the drawing-room, she quietly, and without any apparent intention, took hold of Miss Thelluson’s hand. There was something in the warm, firm clasp so sympathetic that for very gratitude Hannah could have wept.

The subject ended with the closing of the dining-room door, no one suspecting for a moment that one guest present had a vital interest therein. The ladies gathered round the fire, and the countess, who was as popular and agreeable with her own sex as she was with gentlemen, began talking gaily of other things. And so Hannah’s ordeal, from which no one could save her, from which it would have been dangerous to attempt to save her, passed by for the time being.

It was a very happy evening ; not exactly a family evening—the public life the Dunsmares led precluded that—but with a great deal of familiness about it ; more than Hannah had ever imagined could be, in the

days when she sat aloof in her attic parlour at Dunsmore Park, and spent her lonely evenings, empty of love, and feeling that love would never revisit her more. Now, when she saw Lord Dunsmore speak caressingly to his wife, and watched one young couple slip away into the inner parlour—Lady Dunsmore had a proverbial gift for helping young people to fall in love at her house; not make a marriage, but really fall in love—Hannah remembered, with a strange leap of the heart, that her love-days, too, were to come—not past.

Yes, she had been loved—she was loved—even like these. She had felt once—just once—Bernard's arms close around her, and his kiss upon her mouth: and when, solemnly and tenderly rather than passionately, she thought of this—in the very house and among the very people where she had once been so lonely, yet not unblest or discontented in her loneliness—it seemed as if she could never be lonely any more.

When she quitted the drawing-room—coming out of the glitter and the show, yet not unreal or painful show, for there was heart-warmth beneath it all—and went back into her own room, Hannah was happy too.

For there, from a crib in the corner, came the soft breathing of 'auntie's darling,' who always slept beside her now. She had taken her during some slight illness of Grace's, and could not again relinquish the fond charge. It gave her such a sense of rest, and peace, and content—the mere consciousness of little Rosie asleep beside her—it seemed to drive away all the evil angels that sometimes haunted her, the regrets and despondencies over a lot that such a little more would have made quite perfect; and yet that little could not be. Regrets all the sharper that they were not altogether for herself. For she had Rosie; and she was secretly, almost contritely, aware that Rosie was almost enough to make her happy. No so with

Bernard. As she sat over her pleasant fire, she could have blamed herself for that peace of heart in which he could not share.

He had begged her to write to him regularly, and she had agreed; for she knew no reason why both should not take every comfort that fate allowed them. Yet when she sat down she knew not what to say. How was she to write to him—as her brother, her friend, her betrothed? He was all three, and yet neither; and he might never be anything else.

She dropped her pen, and fell into deep thought. Putting herself entirely aside, was it right to allow Bernard, a young man in the prime of his days, to bind himself by an uncertain bond, which debarred him from the natural joys of life, and exposed him to the continual torment of hope deferred, which to a woman would be hard enough, but to a man was all but unendurable?

Now that she was away from Easterham—escaped from the nightmare-like influence of the life, half bliss, half torture, which she had led there—she tried to feel in this new place like a new person, and to judge her own position calmly, as if it had been that of some one else. She thought over, deliberately, every word she had heard from Lord Dunsmore and others that night, and tried to count what reasonable chances there were of the only thing which could ever make her Bernard's wife—the passing of the Bill they had talked about. The result was that, instead of the letter she had meant to write, she sat down and wrote another. Such a one as many a woman has written, too, with bleeding heart and streaming eyes, though the words may have been calm and cold. She implored him for his own sake to consider whether he could not conquer his ill-fated love for herself, and find, among the many charming girls he was always meeting, some one whom he could love and marry. In short, she bade him forget her and be happy.

‘I only want you to be happy,’ she wrote. ‘I shall never blame you—never tell any human being you once cared for me. And you will think of me tenderly still—as you do of my sister Rosa. And you will leave me Rosa’s child?’

Then she planned, in her clear, commonsense way, how this was to be managed; how he was to pay her a yearly sum—she would refuse nothing—for the maintenance of her niece—whom she would herself educate, perhaps abroad, which would make an ostensible reason for the separation.

‘She will comfort me for all I lose, more than you think. She will be a bit of her mother and of you, always beside me; and your letting me take care of her will be almost equivalent to your taking care of me, as you wanted to do, but my hard fate would not allow it.’

And then all she was resigning rushed back upon Hannah’s mind; the sweetness of being loved, the tenfold sweetness of loving.

‘Oh, my Bernard, my Bernard!’ she sobbed, and thought if she could once again, for only one minute, have her arms round his neck, and her head on his shoulder, the giving him up would be less hard. And she wondered how she could have been so thoughtlessly happy an hour ago, when things were in exactly the same position as now, only she saw them in a different light. Hers was one of those bitter destinies, in which the aspect of circumstances, often even of duties, changed every hour.

Still, re-reading her letter, she felt it must go, just as it was. It was right he should know her exact mind, and be set free to act as was best for himself. She finished and sealed it; but she wept over it very much, so much that her child heard her.

A little white ghost with rosy cheeks peeped over the crib-side, and stared, half-frightened, round the unfamiliar room.

‘Rosie wake up! Tannie tying!’ Then Rosie ty too.’ Then came a little wail—‘Tannie take her, in Tannie own arms!’

No resisting that. All love-anguish, love-yearning, fled far away, and Hannah half forgot Bernard in her innocent passion for Bernard’s child.

The letter went, but it brought no answer back. At first Hannah scarcely expected one. He would naturally take time to consider his decision, and she had put it to him as an absolute decision, proposing that, after this event, neither she nor Rosie should go back to Easterham. If he was to be free, the sooner he was free the better. Suspense was sore, as she knew.

A letter of his had crossed hers, written at the very hour she wrote, but in oh! such a different tone,—a real love-letter, out of the deepest heart of an impulsive man, to whom nothing seems impossible. How hard, how cruel must hers have seemed! Still, she was glad she had written it. More and more, the misery of a woman who feels that her love is not a blessing, but a misfortune, to her lover forced itself upon Hannah’s mind. Through all the present pleasantness of her life, her long idle mornings with her darling, her afternoons with Lady Dunsmore, shopping, visiting, or enjoying that charming companionship which was fast growing into the deliberate friendship of middle age, often firmer than that of youth,—through all this came the remembrance of Bernard, not as a joy, as at first, but an actual pain.

For his silence continued: nay, seemed to be intentionally maintained. He forwarded her letters in blank envelopes, without a single word. Was he offended? Had she, in her very love, struck him so hard that he could not forgive the blow?

‘I hope your brother-in-law is well,’ Lady Dunsmore would say, courteously looking away while Hannah opened the daily letter, at first with a trembling anxiety, afterwards with a stolid patience that expected

nothing. 'We shall be delighted to see him here. And, tell him, he ought to come soon, or his little girl will forget him. Three weeks is a long trial of memory at her age.'

'Oh, Rosie will not forget papa. And he is busy—very busy in his parish.' For Hannah could not bear he should be thought to neglect his child.

Yet how explain that she could not deliver the message, could not write to him, or ask him to come? His possible coming was the greatest dread she had. Apart from him she could be stern and prudent; but she knew if he stood before her, with his winning looks and ways—his sisters sometimes declared that from babyhood nobody ever could say no to Bernard—all her wisdom would melt away.

By-and-by, the fear, or the hope—it seemed a strange mixture of both—came true. One day, returning from a drive, leaving Lady Dunsmore behind somewhere, she was told there was a gentleman waiting for her.

'Papa! papa! Dat papa's stick!' shrieked Rosie in an ecstasy, as her sharp young eyes caught sight of it in the hall.

Hannah's heart stood still; but she must go on, the child dragged her. And Rosie, springing into papa's arms, was a shield to her aunt greater than she knew.

Mr. Rivers kissed his little girl fondly. Then, wasting no time in sentiment, the butterfly creature struggled down from him, and offered him a dilapidated toy.

'Rosie's horse broken—papa mend it.'

'Papa wishes he could mend it, with a few other broken things!' said Mr. Rivers bitterly, till, seeing Rosie's pitiful face, he added, 'Never mind, my little woman; papa will try. Go with Grace now, and I will come and see Rosie presently.'

And so he shut the door upon nurse and child, in

a way that made Hannah see clearly he was determined to speak with her alone. But his first words were haughty and cold.

‘I suppose it is scarcely necessary for me to apologise for coming to see my daughter? I had likewise another errand in London—Adeline is here consulting a doctor. She has been worse of late.’

‘I am very sorry.’

Then he burst out: ‘You seem to be sorry for everybody in the world—except me! How could you write me that letter? As if my fate were not hard enough before, but you must go and make it harder.’

‘I wished to lighten it.’

‘How? By telling me to go and marry some one else? What sort of creature do you think a man must be—more, what sort of creature is he likely to grow to—who loves one woman and marries another? For I love you. You may not be young, or beautiful, or clever. I sometimes wonder what there is about you that makes me love you. I fight against my love with every argument in my power. But there it is, and it will not be beaten down. I will marry you, Hannah, if I can. If not, I will have as much of you—your help, your companionship—as ever I can. When are you coming home?’

‘Home?’

‘I say it is home: it must be. Where else should you go to? I cannot be parted from my daughter. Rosie cannot be parted from you. For Rosie’s sake, my house must be your home.’

‘What shall I do?’ said Hannah, wringing her hands. ‘What shall I do?’

She thought she had made her meaning plain enough: but here was the work all to do over again. If she had ever doubted Bernard’s loving her, she had no doubt of it now. It was one of those mysterious attractions, quite independent of external charms, and deepened by every influence that daily intimacy can

exercise. She fully believed him when he said, as he kept saying over and over again, that if he did not marry her he would never marry any other woman. And was she to bid him go away, and never see her more? This when their love was no unholy love, when it trenched upon no natural rights, when no living soul could be harmed by it, and many benefited, as well as they themselves?

Hannah could not do it. All her resolutions melted into air, and alas—he saw that it was so. Anyhow, he saw his power, and used it. With a hungry heart he clasped and kissed her.

‘Now we are friends again. I have been hating you for days, but I’ll forgive you now. You will not write me any more such letters? We will try not to quarrel again.’

‘Quarrel! oh, Bernard!’ and then she made him let her go, insisting that they must be friends, and only friends, just now.

‘Perhaps you are right. I beg your pardon. Only let me hold your hand.’

And so they sat together, silent, for ever so long, till both had recovered from their agitation. Hannah made him tell her about Adeline, who was fast declining, nobody quite saw why; but they thought some London doctor might find it out. And Adeline herself was eager to come.

‘Chiefly, I think, because you are here. She wants you, she says. She will not have any of her own sisters to nurse her; to Bertha especially she has taken a violent dislike, only we don’t mind the fancies of an invalid. I brought Adeline up to town myself. Her husband had some business to attend to; but he comes up with Bertha to-morrow.’

‘He should have come with his wife to-day,’ and then Hannah stopped herself. Of what use was it to open the family eyes to an impossible and therefore imaginary wrong? What good would it do? Pro-



bably much harm. Yet her heart ached for unfortunate Adeline.

She suggested going at once to see her, for Bernard had left her close at hand, in one of those dreary lodgings which seem chiefly occupied by invalids, the most of London fashionable physicians living in streets hard by. Their patients come to be near them, settling down for a few weeks in these sad rooms to recover or to die, as fate might choose.

‘Yes, do let me go,’ repeated Hannah. ‘Shall I fetch Rosie to play with papa while I leave a message for Lady Dunsmore?’

When she came back with the child in her arms Bernard told her she looked quite her old self again. So did he. And she was glad to throw the shield of their former peaceful, simple life over the strong passion that she perceived in him, and felt more and more in herself—the smothered, silent tragedy which might embitter all their coming days.

And yet when she found herself walking with him in the safe loneliness of Regent Street crowds, Hannah was not unhappy. Her long want of him had made him terribly dear. He, too, appeared to snatch at the present moment with a wild avidity.

‘Only to be together—together,’ said he, as he drew her arm through his and kept it there. And the love thus cruelly suppressed seemed to both a thing compared with which all young people’s love—young people who can woo and marry like the rest of the world—was pale and colourless. Theirs resistance had but strengthened, because it was only a struggle against circumstance: unmingled with any conscience-stings, like that of those who fight against some sinful passion. But their passion, though legally forbidden, was morally pure and free from blame.

So they walked on together; content, accepting the joy of the hour, making gay remarks, and peeping into shop-windows, in a childish sort of way, till they

reached the gloomy house where Bernard's sister lay. Then they forgot themselves, and thought only of her.

Adeline was greatly changed. Never very pretty, now she was actually plain. There was a sickly ghastliness about her; a nervous, fretful look, which might be either mental or physical, probably was a combination of both. Not a pleasant wife for a man to come home to; and young Mr. Melville, who was a mere ordinary country squire, without any tastes beyond hunting, shooting, and fishing, was a little to be pitied too. Still men must take their wives, as women their husbands, for better for worse.

'I am very ill, you see, Miss Thelluson,' said the invalid, stretching out a weary hand. 'It was very kind of Bernard to take all this trouble to bring me up to a London doctor, but I don't think it will do any good.'

Hannah uttered some meaningless hope, but faintly, for she saw death in the girl's face. She was only a girl still, and yet in some ways it was the face of an old woman. The smothered pangs of half a lifetime seemed written there.

'I bring good news,' said Bernard, cheerfully. 'I found a letter in the hall saying that Herbert will be here to-morrow, possibly even to-night.'

Adeline looked up eagerly.

'To-night! And anybody with him?'

'Bertha, I believe. Her mother insisted she should come.'

A miserable fire flashed in the poor sunken eyes.

'She shall not come! I will not have her! I want no sisters; my maid is nurse enough. Besides, it is all a sham, a wretched sham. Bertha has no notion of nursing anybody!'

'I think you are mistaken, dear,' said Bernard, soothingly. 'Hannah, what do you say? Ought not her sister to be with her?'

Hannah dropped her eyes; and yet she felt the

miserable girl was watching her with an eagerness actually painful, as if trying to find out how much she guessed of her dreary secret; which, weak and silly as she was in most things, poor Adeline had evidently kept with a bravery worthy of a better cause.

‘I see no use in Bertha’s coming,’ said she again, with a great effort at self-control. ‘I know her better than Hannah does. She is no companion to an invalid; she hates sickness. She will be always with Herbert, not with me. I heard them planning Rotten Row in the morning, and theatres every night. They are strong, and healthy, and lively, while I ——’

The poor young wife burst into tears.

‘I will stay beside her,’ whispered Hannah to Bernard. ‘Go you away.’

After he was gone Adeline burst out hysterically: ‘Keep her away from me! the sight of her will drive me wild. Keep them all away from me, or I shall betray myself, I know I shall. And then they will all laugh at me, and say it is ridiculous nonsense; as perhaps it is. You see’—clutching Hannah’s hand—‘she is by law his sister too. He couldn’t marry her, not if I were dead twenty times over. Sometimes I wish he could, and then they dared not go on as they do. I could turn her out of the house, like any other strange woman who was stealing my husband’s heart from me.’

Hannah made no answer; tried to seem as if she did not hear. Incurable griefs are sometimes best let alone; but this of Adeline’s, having once burst its bonds, would not be let alone.

‘Tell me,’ she said, grasping Hannah’s hand—‘you are a good woman—you will tell me true—is it all nonsense my feeling this as I do? How would you feel if you were in my place? And if you were Bertha would you do as she does? Would you try to make your sister’s husband fond of you, as he ought not to

'be of any woman except his wife, and then say, "Oh, it's all right, we're brother and sister?" But is it right? Hannah Thelluson, is it right? Suppose your sister had been living how would it have been between you and Bernard?'

A startling way of putting the question, far more so than the questioner dreamed of. For a moment Hannah winced, and then her strong, clear, common sense, as well as her sense of justice, came to the rescue and righted her at once.

'You might as well ask how would it have been between me and any other woman's husband in whose house I happened to stay. Of course he would have been nothing to me — nothing whatever. I am not married,' she added, smiling, 'and I cannot quite judge of married people's feelings. But I think if I ever loved a man well enough to be his wife, I should not be a jealous wife at all. Sister or friend might come about the house as much as he chose. I could trust him, for I could trust myself. I would be so much to him that he would never care for anybody but me. That is, while living. When I was dead' — there Hannah paused, and tried solemnly to put herself in the place of a dead wife — of Bernard's dead wife viewing him tenderly from the celestial sphere — 'if the same love for my sister or my friend, which would be his degradation in my lifetime, could be his blessing afterwards, let him take it, and be blessed!'

Adeline looked astounded. But the hidden sore had been opened, the cleansing, healing touch had been applied. There was a reasonableness in her expression, as she replied —

'That is altogether a new notion of love. You might not feel so if you were married, or if you were really fond of anybody. Now I was very fond of Herbert, even when I knew he liked Bertha. But when he came to like me, and married me — seeing that it made him safe never to marry my sister — I

thought I could not possibly be jealous again. No more I am, in one sense. They will never do anything wrong. But there's a great deal short of doing wrong that breaks a wife's heart; and they have broken mine — they have broken mine!

Again rose up the feeble wail of the weak, affectionate soul, who yet had not the power to win or command affection. From sheer pity, Hannah forbore to blame.

'Why not speak to them plainly?' suggested she at last. 'Why not tell them they are making you unhappy?'

'And be laughed at for my pains, as a sickly, jealous-minded fool! Because he can't ever marry her — the law forbids that, you know. After I am dead he must choose somebody else, and she too, and nobody will blame them for anything; and yet they have killed me.'

'Hush — hush!' said Hannah; 'that is not true — not right. You yourself allowed they meant no harm, and will never do anything wrong.'

'What is wrong?' cried poor Adeline, piteously. 'I want my husband — his company, his care, his love; and I don't get him. He turns to somebody else. And I hate that somebody — even if she is my own sister. And I wish I could drive her out of the house — that I do! or shame her openly, as if she were any strange girl who dared come flirting with my husband. They're wicked women all of them, and they break the hearts of us poor wives.'

There was a certain bitter truth under Adeline's frenzied fancies; but Hannah had no time to reply to either. For, while they were talking, there was a bustle outside. Gay, blooming, excited with her journey, Bertha Rivers burst in, Mr. Melville following her.

'So I am come, Addy dear, though you didn't want me. But you'll be glad of me, I know. Why, you're looking quite rosy again; isn't she, Herbert?'

Rosy she was ; for her cheeks burnt like coals. But the husband, as he carelessly kissed her, never found it out : and Bertha, in her redundant health and exuberant spirits, never noticed the dead silence of her sister's welcome—the sullen way in which she turned her face to the wall, and left them to their chatter and their mirth.

It was the same all the evening ; for Hannah, at Adeline's earnest request, had stayed. Mrs. Melville scarcely spoke a word. Their plans were discussed, sometimes including her, sometimes not ; but all were talked of freely before her. It never seemed to occur to any one—not even to Bernard—that Adeline was dying. And with that wonderful self-command, which perhaps only the conscious approach of death could have given to so weak a nature, Adeline never betrayed, by look or word, the secret jealousy that at any rate had helped to sap her frail life away.

‘Come and see me every day,’ she whispered when Miss Thelluson wished her good-bye. ‘I’ll try and remember what you said ; but please forget everything I said. Let nobody guess at it. I shall not trouble any of them very long.’

Hannah walked home, strangely silent and sad, even though she was beside Bernard ; and feeling, as one often is forced to feel, that other people's miseries would perhaps be worse to bear than one's own.

## CHAPTER XIII.

LADY DUNSMORE was a shrewd and far-seeing woman. She responded with the utmost civility to all Miss Bertha Rivers's advances, and planned no end of gaieties for her and Hannah, from which the Rivers family might plainly see—and she meant them to see

—that she desired her friend Miss Thelluson's visit to be made as pleasant as possible.

But fate and Hannah's own will stood in the way. Adeline declined more rapidly than any one expected; and it soon became evident that she was never likely to quit those dull lodgings in Harley Street, except to be taken back to Easterham in the one peaceful way;—as, however far off they died, it had always been the custom to carry home all the Riverses. Even Adeline herself seemed to understand this.

‘I don't want to stir from here—it is too much trouble,’ she said one day to Hannah, now daily beside her. ‘But, afterwards, tell them they may take me home. Not to the Grange—that never was home—but to the Moat-House. Let them have me one night in the drawing-room there, before they put me under the daisies. And let Bernard read the service over me. And—you may tell him and them all, that I was not sorry to die—I did not mind it—I felt so tired!’

Nevertheless

‘On some fond breast the parting soul relies.’

And that breast was for Adeline, not her husband's, but Hannah's. Of any one else's nursing she testified such impatience—perhaps feeling instinctively that it was given more out of duty than love—that gradually both Mr. Melville and Bertha let her have her own way. Things ended in Miss Thelluson's spending most of her time, not in the Dunsmores' lively mansion, but in that dull drawing-room from whence, except to her bed-room, Adeline was never moved.

‘Do stay with her as much as you can,’ entreated Bernard, who ran up for a day to London as often as he could, but who still saw no more than brothers usually see, the mere outside of his sister's life. He knew she was doomed; but, then, the doctors had said Adeline was consumptive, and not likely to live to be old. ‘And she has had a happy life, married

to the good fellow whom she was always fond of. Poor Adeline ! And she has grown so much attached to you, Hannah. She says you are such a comfort to her.'

'I think I have rather a faculty for comforting sick people : perhaps because doing so comforts me.'

But Hannah did not say—where was the use of saying?—that this comfort was to her not unneeded. The uncertainty of her present position ; the daily self-suppression it entailed ; nay, the daily hypocrisy, or what to her honest nature felt like such,—were so painful that sometimes, when Bernard appeared, she did not know whether she was glad or sorry to see him. But everybody else—even the Dunsdales—seemed heartily glad. And no one appeared to have the slightest suspicion of any bond between Rosie's aunt and Rosie's father except little Rosie. Sometimes this was to her a relief—sometimes an inexpressible pain.

'Good-bye, and God bless you for all your goodness to my sister,' said Bernard one Saturday as he was going back to Easterham. 'They will all bless you one of these days,' added he tenderly,—all he could say, for he and she were not alone. They seldom were alone now. Opportunities were so difficult to make, and, when made, the fear of being broken in upon in their tête-à-têtes caused them to feel awkward and uncomfortable—at least, Hannah did.

'Good-bye,' she responded, with a sad, inward smile at the phrase, 'one of these days.' Did it mean when they should be married ? But that day might never come, or come when they were quite elderly people, and hope deferred had drained their hearts dry of all but the merest dregs of love. And the picture of the woman who might have been Bernard's wife, happy and honoured, accepted by his family, welcomed by his neighbours, reigning joyfully at the House on the Hill, and finally succeeding to



the Moat-House, to be there all that a Lady Rivers should be — presented itself bitterly to Hannah's imagination. She had taken from him the chance of all this, and more, and given him in return — what? A poor, weary heart, which, though it was bursting with love, could not utter more than that cold 'good-bye.'

But when she had said it and returned to Adeline's bed-side, Hannah forgot the troubles of life in the solemnity of fast-advancing death.

'It is hard Bernard is obliged to go,' the sick girl said pitifully. 'He likes to sit with me a little. I can see that. *They* do not; and therefore I don't want to have them. Besides, I can't have one of them without having both; and I won't have both. Nobody could expect it.'

'No,' said Hannah, feeling sorrowfully that it was useless to argue against what had grown almost into a monomania, though the poor sick girl had still self-control enough not to betray herself, except in incidental, half-intelligible words like these. Better leave it thus, and let her sorrow die with her — one of the heart-wounds which nobody avenges; one of the thefts for which nobody is punished.

At length, just in the middle of the London season, when, one summer morning, Mayfair lay in the passing lull between the closing of opera and theatres, and the breaking up of late balls, a cab thundered up to the Earl of Dunsmore's door. It was Mr. Melville coming to fetch Miss Thelluson to his wife. She was dying.

And then Hannah found out that the young man had some feeling. Full of strength and health himself, he had never really believed in Adeline's illness, still less her approaching death, till now; and it came upon him with a shock indescribable. Overwhelmed with grief, and something not unlike remorse, during the twelve hours she still lingered he never

quitted her side. Careless as he had been to his living wife, to a wife really dying he was the tenderest husband in the world. So much so that she once turned to Hannah with a piteous face,—

‘Oh, if this could only last! Couldn’t you make me well again?’

But she could not be made well again; and—it might not have lasted—this late happiness which gave her peace in dying. Poor Adeline! it was better to die. And when Hannah watched the big fellow, now utterly subdued by the emotion of the hour, insist upon feeding his wife with every mouthful of her last food, as tenderly as if she were a baby,—sit supporting her on the bed, motionless for hours, till his limbs were all cramped and stiff—sadder than ever seemed the blind folly, perhaps begun in a mistake on both sides, which had ended in letting a poor heart first starve for love, and then grow poisoned with a nameless jealousy, until between the hunger and the poison it died.

For Adeline did die: but her death was peaceful, and it was in her husband’s arms.

‘He is fond of me, after all, you see,’ she whispered to Hannah in one of Herbert’s momentary absences. ‘It was very foolish of me to be so jealous of Bertha. Perhaps I should not, had it been a thing I could have spoken about. And don’t speak of it now, please. Only if he ever wants to do as his father did, and the law will allow it, tell him he may as well marry Bertha as anybody;—I shall not mind.’

But to Bertha herself, although she kissed her in token of amity and farewell, Adeline said not a word. The secret wound, vainly plaistered over, seemed to bleed even though she was dying.

Her end had come so suddenly at last, that no one from Easterham had been sent for, and when Bernard arrived next morning at his accustomed hour, it was to find a shut-up house and his sister ‘away.’ Then, in

the shock of his first grief, Hannah found out, as she had never done before, how close, even with all their faults, was the tie which bound him to his own people. It touched her deeply—it made her love him better, and honour him more; and yet it frightened her. For there might come a time when he had to choose, deliberately and decisively, between the love of kindred and the love of her; and she foresaw, now more clearly than ever, how hard the struggle would be.

In the absorption of her close attendance upon Adeline, she had heard little of what was going on in the outside world. Even 'the Bill'—the constant subject of discussion at Dunsmore House—had faded out of her mind; till such phrases as 'read the first time,' 'read the second time,' 'very satisfactory majority,' and so on, met her ear. Once they would have been mere meaningless forms of speech, now she listened intently, and tried hard to understand. She did understand so far as to learn that there was every probability this session of the Bill's passing the Commons, and being carried up to the House of Lords, where, upon a certain night, a certain number of noblemen, some biassed one way or other by party motives, and a proportion voting quite carelessly, without any strong feeling at all in the matter, would decide her happiness and Bernard's for life.

It was a crisis so hard, a suspense so terrible, that perhaps it was as well this grief came to dull it a little. Not entirely. Even amidst his sorrow for his sister, Hannah could detect a nervous restlessness in Mr. Rivers's every movement. Every day, too, he sought eagerly for the newspaper, and often his hands actually trembled as he took it up and turned at once to the parliamentary notices. But he never said one word to Hannah, nor she to him; indeed, this time, they were never alone at all.

Adeline was to be buried at home, and Mr. Melville begged that Hannah would accompany Bertha,

and take her place, with his wife's sisters and his own, at the funeral. Lady Rivers, in a note, asked the same; adding a cordial invitation that she should stay at the Moat-House. Hannah looked at Bernard.

'Yes, go,' he said: 'I wish it. They are very grateful to you for your goodness to her. And I want you,' he continued in a low tone, 'to try to be one of us—which you may be before very long.'

This was all; but Hannah felt forced to obey, even though it cost her the first parting from her child. Only a three days' parting, however; and Bernard seemed so glad that she should go.

She, too, as she sat with the other three mourners—one in each corner of the silent railway carriage—and watched the soft rain falling on the fields and reddening hedges, under which, here and there, appeared a dot of yellow—an early primrose—she was conscious in her heart of a throb of hope responding to the pulses of the spring; and, once suddenly looking up at Bernard, she fancied he felt it too. It was nature, human nature, and human passion, suppressed but never crushed, waking out of its long sleep. and crying unto God to bless it with a little happiness—even as He blesses the reviving earth with the beauty of the spring.

Miss Thelluson's welcome at the Moat-House, mournful as it was, was kind; for they had all been touched by her kindness to the dead, and sorrow strikes the tenderest chord in every heart. She had never liked Bernard's people so well, or been drawn to them so much, as during that quiet evening when poor Adeline's coffin rested a night under the Moat-House roof; or the day after, when with all the family she followed it to its last resting-place.

It was a curious sensation. To stand as one of them—these Riverses whom she loved not, at best merely liked—well aware how little they had ever liked her, and how ignorant they were of the tie which bound her to them. Guiltless as she knew herself to

be, she was not without a painful feeling of deception, that jarred terribly upon her proud and candid spirit. She scarcely said a word to Bernard, until he whispered, 'Do speak to me now and then, or they will think it so strange.' But even then her words were formal and few.

She had meant to leave on the third day, for she yearned to be back with her darling; but fate came between. Sir Austin, long an invalid, and almost a nonentity in the family, passed, the night after his daughter's funeral, suddenly and unawares, into the silent dignity of death. When Hannah came down next morning, it was to find the Moat-House plunged once more into that decent, decorous affliction which was all that could be expected of them under the circumstances.

They begged her to stay a little longer, and she stayed. There was a good deal to be done, and the ladies soon found out how well Miss Thelluson could do it. Also not being a relative, she could see the visitors, and retail to the family the wide-spread sympathy expressed for it at Easterham, and for many miles round. 'You are such a comfort to us,' they said; and Bernard, whom his father's death seemed to affect more deeply than Hannah had expected, said, in his entreating eyes, 'You are such a comfort to me.' So, what could she do but stay?

A few days more, and the Rivers' vault was again opened; and Miss Thelluson stood beside it, with all the Rivers family, except the new Sir Austin, of whom nobody spoke, except the Easterham lawyer, who lamented confidentially to Hannah that Mr. Rivers should be kept out of his title, though it could not be for more than a few years. The hapless elder brother, whose mind grew weaker and weaker every day, though his body was strong enough, might at any time have some fit that would carry him off, and prevent his being an encumbrance longer.

‘And then,’ whispered the lawyer, ‘Mr. Rivers will be Sir Bernard; and what a fine position he will hold! one of the finest in the county. What a pity he has no heir—only an heiress! But of course he will now marry immediately. Indeed he owes it to his family.’

Hannah listened, as she was now learning to listen—teaching her poor, mobile, conscious face the hardness of marble. Her heart, too, if possible; for these torments, so far from lessening, would increase day by day. How should she ever bear them? She sometimes did not know.

The family had just come out of the study, where the will had been read, and were settling down to that strange quiet evening known in most households, when the dead having been taken away and buried out of sight, the living, with an awful sense of relief as well as of loss, try to return to their old ways—eat, drink, and talk as usual. But it was in vain; and after a silent dinner, Bernard went back to the examination of papers in the study. Thence he presently sent a message for help.

‘I suppose that means Miss Thelluson,’ said Bertha, with a half laugh, which Lady Rivers gravely extinguished.

‘Go, my dear. I daresay your brother-in-law finds you more useful to him than any one else.’ So Hannah went.

Bernard was sitting—his head in his hands. It was a white, woe-begone face that he lifted up to Hannah.

‘Thank you for coming. I thought perhaps you might. I wanted comfort.’

Hannah said a few commonplace but gentle words.

‘Oh no, it is not that. I am not sorry my poor old father is away. It was his time to go. And for me there will be one less to fight against, one less to wound.’

He said the latter words half inaudibly—evidently

not meaning her to hear, but she did, at least some of them. A wild, bitter answer came to her lips, but this was not the time to utter it. She merely replied by an offer to help, and sat down to fulfil it. He showed her what to do, and they went on working silently together for nearly half-an-hour.

But the extremes of human emotion are not so far apart as they seem. Keen and real as the young man's grief was, he was a young man still, and when the woman he loved sat beside him, with her sweet grave look, and her calm, still manner, another passion than grief began to stir within him.

'Hannah,' he cried, seizing her hand, 'are you happy, or miserable—as I am? or, which seems most likely, have you no feeling at all?'

She looked up. It was not a face of stone.

'Put your work away—what does it matter? Talk to me, Hannah. Think how long it is since you and I have had a quiet word together.'

'Can I help that?'

'No,—nor I. We are both of us victims—tied and bound victims in the hands of Fate. Sometimes I think she will get the better of us, and we shall both perish miserably.'

'That is a very melancholy view to take of things,' said Hannah, half smiling. 'Let us hope it is not quite true.'

'My bright, brave-hearted woman! If I had you always beside me, I should not go down. It is being alone that sinks a man to despair. Still, suspense is very hard.'

And then he told her what she had not been before aware of,—that the Bill had safely passed the House of Commons; that Lord Dunsmore and other peers, a rather strong party, hoped even in the House of Lords, which had hitherto always thrown it out, to get this year a sufficient majority to carry it through and make it the law of the land.

‘And then, Hannah, we can be married—married immediately.’

He gasped rather than uttered the words. Passion resisted had conquered him with double force.

‘But—your own people?’

‘They like you now—appreciate you, even as Lady Dunsmore does.’ (He did not see, and Hannah had not the heart to suggest, that perhaps it was in consequence of that appreciation.) ‘Besides, whether or not, they must consent. They cannot go against me. My father has left everything in my hands. I am, to all intents and purposes, the head of the family. It is that which makes me so anxious. Should the Bill not pass —— But it will pass!’ he cried, impetuously, ‘and then no power on earth shall prevent me from marrying the woman I choose—and that is you!’

‘Strange, strange!’ murmured Hannah, half to herself, and dropped her conscious face, and felt more like a girl than she had done for many years. For she had no duties to think of; her child was away, there was only her lover beside her. Her lover, wooing her with a reality of love, a persistent earnestness, that no woman could either question or mistake.

‘You are not quite colourless, I see, my white lily. You will not always shrink back when I want to take you to my heart? You will creep in there some day, and make it feel warm again, instead of cold, and empty, and lonely, as it is now. Hannah, how soon, supposing the Bill passes this month, how soon will you let me marry you?’

They were standing together by the fire, and Bernard had just put his arm round her. She turned towards him, she could not help it; it was so sweet to be thus loved. Hand in hand, and eye to eye, they stood for the moment, yielding to present joy and future hope, absorbed in one another, thinking of nothing beyond themselves, seeing and hearing nothing, when the



door opened, and Lady Rivers stood right in front of them.

‘Good heavens!’ she exclaimed, and started as if she had trodden on a snake.

They started too—these guilty-innocent lovers. Instinctively they drew back from one another; and then Bernard recovered himself.

Vexatious as the crisis was—though he looked as if he would have given anything rather than have had it happen—still, now that it had happened, he was too much of a man not to meet it—too much of a gentleman not to know how to meet it decorously. He moved back again to Hannah’s side and took her hand.

‘Well, Lady Rivers, had you anything to say to me?’

‘Well, Bernard Rivers, and what have you to say for yourself? And what has this—this young woman—to say for herself, I should like to know?’

‘If you mean Miss Thelluson, her answer is as brief as my own must be. She has promised to be my wife as soon as our marriage can be lawfully carried out. In the meantime we are friends, close friends; and, as you may have observed, we also consider ourselves engaged lovers. Hannah, do not distress yourself; there is no need.’

And, in the face of his step-mother, he put his protecting arm round her—she was trembling violently—and drew her head on his shoulder.

There are some people whom to master you must take by storm. Hold your own, and they will let you have it; perhaps even respect you the more; but show the slightest symptom of weakness, and they will trample you into the dust. Bernard knew perfectly well with whom he had to deal, and took his measures accordingly.

Lady Rivers—utterly astounded, less perhaps by the fact itself than by the cool way in which Bernard had taken its discovery—simply stood and stared.

‘I never knew anything so dreadful ; never in all my life. Excuse my intrusion. The only thing I can do is to leave you immediately.’

She turned and quitted the room, shutting the door after her. Then, left alone with him, Hannah sobbed out her bitter humiliation upon Bernard’s breast.

He comforted her as well as he could, saying that this must have happened some day ; perhaps it was as well it should happen now ; and that he did not much care. Still it was evident he did care ; that he was considerably annoyed.

‘Of course, it increases our perplexities much ; for our secret is no longer our own. In her wrath and indignation, she will blab it out to the whole community ; unless indeed family pride ties her tongue. But, anyhow, we cannot help ourselves ; we must brave it out. Come with me, Hannah.’

‘Where ?’

‘Into the next room, to face them all and tell the exact truth. Otherwise we may be overburdened with any quantity of lies. Come, my dear one. You are not afraid ?’

‘No.’ She had had all along a vague doubt that when it came to the point he would be ashamed of her and of his love for her. To find that he was not, gave Hannah such comfort that she felt as if she could have walked barefoot over red-hot ploughshares, like some slandered woman of the Middle Ages, if only she might find at the end of her terrible march Bernard’s face looking at her as it looked now.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I will come with you at once ; for what is told must be told quickly, I cannot stay another night in this house.’

‘You must, I fear,’ answered Bernard, gently ‘Where would you go to ? To mine ?’

‘Oh, no, no, I can never go to your house any more.’

And the cruel penalties of their position, the chains

which bound them on all sides began to be felt by both, in a manner neither had ever felt before. To Hannah it seemed as if she were actually treading between those fiery ploughshares, and she could not have steadied her steps, but for Bernard's supporting hand.

She held to him, literally with the clinging grasp of a child, as they passed across the hall to where, in the fine old drawing-room, like a conclave of the Inquisition, the whole family were assembled.

Lady Rivers had evidently been explaining what she had just heard and seen. Astonishment was upon every face, and but for one accidental circumstance, the presence of Herbert Melville, there might have been a stronger feeling yet. But indecorum being the greatest dread, and prudence the principal characteristic, of the Riverses, they were obliged to restrain their wrath within the natural limits of an offended family which has just discovered that one of its members has made a matrimonial engagement without telling them anything about it. Even Lady Rivers, with her widowed son-in-law standing by, was forced more than once to pause and alter her form of speech, dilating more on the wicked secrecy with which Bernard had planned his marriage than the sort of marriage he was about to make.

When the two culprits walked in, looking agitated enough, but still not exactly like culprits, she stopped—

‘Let them speak for themselves, if they have the face to do it,’ cried she, dropping down in her chair exhausted with vituperation. And then his sisters rushed to Bernard—some angry, some in tears—asking him how he could ever think of doing such a dreadful thing; with his father not yet cold in his grave—their poor, poor father, who would have shuddered at the thought of such a marriage.

It was a hard strait for a man to be in. That he felt it as acutely as so tender a heart could possibly

feel, was plain. He turned deadly pale; but still he never let go of Hannah's hand. She—for a moment she thought of breaking from him and flying out of the house—anywhere—to the world's end—that she might save him from her and her fatal love. Then a wise resolution came—the determination, since he had chosen her, to stand by him to the last. By her child, too, for one implied both. Thinking of little Rosie, she was strong again; for no sense of guilt enfeebled her; all she was conscious of was misery—pure misery; and that was at least bearable. She sat down in the chair where Bernard had placed her, still holding him fast by the hand; the only being she had to hold to in the wide world now.

‘Sisters,’ said he at last, speaking very quietly, but as firmly as he could, ‘what your mother has just found out I intended to have kept back from you till the law made my marriage possible. I knew how you would feel about it—as I felt myself once; but people’s minds change.’

‘So it appears,’ said Lady Rivers, with a loud sneer. ‘Especially after living in the same house together—for months and months.’

‘Especially after living in the same house together—as you say,’ repeated Bernard, deliberately, though his cheek flamed furiously. ‘Living in a relation close enough to give us every opportunity of finding out one another’s character, and of wishing the tie should be made closer still. I did not love her at first; not for a long time; but once loving her, I love her for ever. What I do—I beg you all to understand—is not done hastily, but deliberately. Long before I ever said a word otherwise than brotherly to Miss Thelluson, or she had any suspicion of what my feelings were, my mind was made up. I shall marry her if I can, believing that, both for my own sake and my child’s, it is the wisest second marriage I could make—and the most natural.’

‘Marry her! after living together as brother and sister—or whatever you choose to call it,’ cried Mrs. Morecamb. ‘Thomas, dear, did you ever hear of anything so shocking—so improper?’

‘The law did not hold it improper,’ answered Bernard, in extreme irritation. ‘And as I tell you—at first we had no idea of such a thing. It came upon us unawares. The law should not have placed us in such a position. But it will be broken soon, I trust. And until then you may all rest satisfied; Miss Thelluson will never again enter my house until she enters it as my wife. Then, sisters, whether you like her or not, you must pay her the respect due to a brother’s wife, or else I am your brother no longer.’

He had taken a high tone—it was wisest; but now he broke down a little. In that familiar home, with the familiar faces round him—two out of them just missing, and for ever—it was hard to go against them all. And when—the gentlemen having prudently stepped out of the room—the women began sobbing and crying, lamenting over the terrible misfortune which had fallen on the family, things went very sore against Bernard.

‘And supposing the Bill you talk of does not pass, and you cannot carry out this most unnatural, most indecent marriage,’ said Lady Rivers; ‘may I ask what you mean to do? To go abroad, and get married there? as I hear some people do; though afterwards, of course, they are never received in society again? Or, since ladies who can do such unlady-like things must have very easy consciences, perhaps Miss Thelluson will excuse your omitting the ceremony altogether.’

Bernard sprang up furious. ‘If you had not been my father’s wife, and my father only this day buried, you and I should never have exchanged another word as long as I lived. As it is, Lady Rivers, say one word more—one word against her—and you will find

out how a man feels who sees the woman he loves insulted—even by his own relations. Sisters!’ he turned to them, almost entreatingly, as if in his natural flesh and blood he might hope to find some sympathy. ‘Sisters, just hear me.’

But they all turned away, including Bertha, whom poor Adeline had judged rightly as a mere coquette; and who evidently was not at all anxious that brothers-in-law, however convenient to flirt with, should be allowed to marry their deceased wives’ sisters. She stood aloof, a pattern of propriety, beside the rest; and even made some sharp, ill-natured remark concerning Hannah, which Hannah heard, and lifted up reproachful eyes to the women whom she had been helping and comforting, and feeling affectionately to, all the week, but who now held themselves apart from her, as if she had been the wickedest creature living.

‘You know that is untrue, Bertha. I was then perfectly sincere in every word I uttered; but, as Mr. Rivers says, people’s feelings change. I did not care for him in the least once—but I do now. And if he holds fast by me, I will hold fast by him, in spite of you all.’

Slowly, even mournfully, she said this; less like a confession of love than a confession of faith—the troth-plight which, being a righteous one, no human being has a right to break. They stood together—these two, terribly sad and painfully agitated, but still firm in their united strength—stood and faced their enemies.

For enemies, the bitterest any man can have,—those of his own household—undoubtedly Bernard’s sisters and their mother now were. It seemed hardly credible that this was the same family who, only a few hours ago, had wept together over the same open grave, and comforted one another in the same house of mourning. Now, out of that house, all solemnity, all

tenderness, had departed ; and it became a house full of rancour, heart-burning, and strife.

Long the battle raged, and it was a very sore one. A family fight always must be. The combatants know so well each other's weak points. They can plant arrows between the joints of the armour, and inflict wounds from behind ; wounds which take years to heal—if ever healed at all. Hannah could hardly have believed that any persons really attached to one another, as these were, could have said to one another so many bitter things within so short a time. Such untrue things also, or such startling travesties of truth ; such alterations of facts and misinterpretations of motives, that she sometimes stood aghast and wondered if she had not altogether deceived herself as to right and wrong ; and whether she were not the erring wretch they made her out to be. Only her—not him ; they loved him ; evidently they looked upon him as the innocent victim to her arts—the fly in the spider's web, glad of any generous kindred hand that would come and tear it down, and set him free. Unfortunate Bernard !

He bore it all for a good while—not perhaps, seeing the whole drift of the arguments—till some chance speech opened his eyes. Then his man's pride rose up at once. He walked across the hearth, and once more took hold of Hannah's hand.

'You may say what you like about me ; but if you say one word against her here, you shall repent it all your lives. Now, this must end. I have heard all you have to say, and answered it. Sisters, look here. You may talk as much as you like, seeing you are my sisters, for ten minutes more,'—and he laid his watch on the table, with that curious mixture of authority and good-humour which used to make them say Bernard could do anything with anybody. 'After that you must stop. Every man's patience has its limits. I am the head of the house, and can marry whomsoever

I choose; and I choose to marry Miss Thelluson, if I have to wait years and years. So, girls, you may as well make up your minds to it. Otherwise, when she is Lady Rivers—as one day she may be—you would find it a little awkward.’

He half smiled as he spoke; perhaps he knew them well enough to feel sure that the practical, rather than the sentimental, side was the safest to take them on; perhaps, also, he felt that a smile was better than a furious word or tear—and both were not far off, for his heart was tender as well as wroth; but the plan answered.

Lady Rivers gave the signal to retire. ‘For this night, Miss Thelluson, I suppose you will be glad to accept the shelter of our roof; but perhaps you may find it not inconvenient to leave us to-morrow. Until that desirable event, which Bernard seems so sure of, does take place, you will see at once that with my unmarried daughter still under my charge——’

‘It will be impossible for you to keep up any acquaintance with me,’ continued Hannah, calmly. ‘I quite understand. This good night will be a permanent good-bye to you all.’

Lady Rivers bowed. But she was a prudent woman. It was a perfectly polite bow—as of a lady who was acting not so much of her own volition as from the painful pressure of circumstances.

Hannah rose, and tried to stand without shaking. Her heart was very full. The sense of shame or disgrace was not there;—how could it be, with her conscience clear, and Bernard beside her?—but bitter regret was. She had been with his people so much of late, that sorrow had drawn them closer to her than she had ever believed possible. Likewise, they were his people, and she tried still to believe in the proverb that ‘blood is thicker than water.’

‘I have done you no harm—not one of you,’ she said, almost appealingly. ‘Nor your brother either.’



I only loved him. If we are ever married, I shall devote my life to him; if not, it is I that shall suffer. In any case, my life is sad enough. Do not be hard upon me, you that are all so happy.'

And she half extended her hand.

But no one took it. Neither mother nor sisters gave one kind word to this motherless, sisterless woman, who they knew perfectly well had done nothing wrong—only something foolish. But the foolishness of this world is sometimes higher than its wisdom.

'Good night,' said Bernard; 'good night, my dearest. You will find me waiting at the railway at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, to take you direct to Lady Dunsmore's.'

With a chivalrous tenderness worthy of his old crusading ancestors—those good knights pledged to heaven to succour the distressed—he took Hannah by the rejected hand, kissed it before them all, led her to the door, and, closing it upon her, went back to his mother and sisters.

## CHAPTER XIV.

It was the dreariest of wet March mornings, more like Winter than Spring—when they met at the station—those two whom, if all the eyes of Easterham had been on them, no one would ever have taken for lovers, so grave, so sad, so silent were they. The only attention Bernard paid to her was the common courtesy of any gentleman to a lady—any kind-hearted man to a suffering woman. For that Hannah did suffer, was plain. To rise in the dull dawn of the morning, to breakfast alone, and steal away, unnoticed and uncared for by any member of the family, was outward humiliation enough; but it was nothing to the inward pain. No

wonder that her eyes were heavy and sleepless, her face deadly white, and that even the village doctor, whom they met on the platform, noticed how very ill Miss Thelluson was looking.

‘Yes, she was my sister’s constant nurse, and has been helping us here through all our trouble,’ said Bernard, hastily. ‘She is very much worn out; and I am glad to be taking her back at once to her friend Lady Dunsmore.’

Hannah recognised the prudence, and was grateful. Yet still that there should be this vital need for prudence, for circumspection, for worldly wisdom, was itself a kind of mute disgrace.

The doctor travelled up with them to London; so they had not one word together;—Bernard and she—till they found themselves alone in the cab. Then he seized her hand.

‘We have but five minutes, my love. Always my love! Remember that; and for my sake forgive all.’

‘I have nothing to forgive. Thinking as they do, they could scarcely act otherwise than as they do. But, oh, it is hard. I was growing so fond of Easterham—of them too. And now I shall never see the Moat-House or them again.’

‘Do not be too sure of that,’ said Bernard, passionately. ‘You may be back again ere many weeks. Back—in a character in which they must receive you.’

And then he explained how he had seen in the day’s newspapers that the Bill was to be brought up to the House of Lords for the second reading that very night.

‘The critical night. Lord Dunsmore has been expecting it for long. There will be a debate; still, I know, he hoped for a majority—small, indeed, but enough to carry it through—enough to save us. Oh, Hannah, if it were right to pray for such a thing—such a common secular thing as a few votes more or less in Parliament—I, a clergyman too.’

He laughed; but his eye glittered with excitement. Hannah was almost frightened when she looked at him.

‘I am glad the suspense will be ended to-night,’ he continued. ‘You see, the trial is harder for me than for most—though I believe, by Lord Dunsmore’s account, that there are hundreds of men in England in my position—waiting till the Bill shall pass. But then I am like a “city set on a hill”—like my house, as you used to say to me. A clergyman, contemplating an act which is directly contrary to the canon law, and in which my very bishop—I understand—is dead against me. I shall be excommunicated, of course—that is, suspended—unless, by-the-by, if my marriage ever takes place, it be according to law; and, then, whatever he thinks, the bishop cannot suspend me. Oh, we care quite as much for the law as the gospel, we clergymen!’

And he laughed again, and still continued rapidly talking in a way very unusual with him. Evidently the trial was becoming past his endurance; and now that there was added the home-warfare—to which he never referred—things would be worse still. Suffering, they say, often changes a woman into an angel; but it is not so with men—generally quite the contrary. Hannah was so grieved that she hardly answered a word till they reached their destination.

‘Stop a minute!’ Bernard said. ‘I had meant to leave you here—and go——’

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere; it does not matter. But I cannot do it. Oh, Hannah, keep me beside you! I am good then. Could you not invent some nice little falsehood for my staying?’

‘Does it need a falsehood to excuse a father’s coming to see his own child?’ said Hannah, gravely.

‘The child—always the child!’ he cried. ‘You care for nobody else. I do believe you are marrying

me—if ever we are married—solely for the sake of the child.’

Hannah paused a minute before she answered. His remark was not exactly true, yet there was some truth in it; and to deny truth is always dangerous. She laid her hand on his very tenderly—the tenderness of a love so baptized in sorrow that almost all earthly passion had been washed out of it.

‘Bernard, if what you say were true—I do not allow that it is—but if it were, would it be a wicked thing? Would Rosie’s mother, or need Rosie’s father, be angry with me for it?’

‘No, no!’ And for the hundredth time, looking at the saintly patience of her face—a face in which, besides love, were written grief, and loss, and resignation—he learnt patience too.

Lady Dunsmore had gone out, and might not be home till dinner-time; but had left a note for Miss Thelluson in case she returned to-day, which the countess seemed to have expected.

‘Why? Does she guess anything, do you suppose?’

‘Everything, I believe,’ said Hannah. ‘But she has never breathed one syllable to me, and never will.’

‘Good, wise, generous woman! We must tell her all to-morrow.’

But Hannah only sighed. She had little faith in ‘to-morrow.’ People whose lives have been very sunless gradually cease to believe in the sun.

It was a long, long day. They could hardly have got through it but for the child, who with her little imperative queenliness put aside both past and future, and compelled them to live in the present. Desperately in love as he was, Mr. Rivers had a father’s heart, and the mother-heart in Hannah kept it alive. Also after the domestic storms of the Moat-House there was something in the innocent peace of the baby-life—so absorbed in little things—which soothed them both. Men might have laughed, but angels

would have smiled, to see these two forlorn lovers, who dared not show their love, to whom one another's presence was always a painful restraint—often an actual dread—comforting one another a little in their common love of the child.

Lady Dunsmore smiled, too, when she saw them building houses of cards for Rosie on the nursery floor, and then blowing them down with the solemnest of faces; but after the smile she turned away with a tear. She had a heart—this brilliant little woman of the world.

Kissing Hannah, she said a few words of gentle condolence to Mr. Rivers.

'I did not wonder that Miss Thelluson was kept at the Moat-House, she is such a help to everybody in trouble; but I am glad you have brought her back now, and glad you have come to see your little girl. She would have forgotten papa soon. You will stay and dine? We have no guests, for Lord Dunsmore will be at the House. He speaks to-night, if the Marriages' Bill comes on for the second reading, as we expect it will.'

Bernard made some brief assent.

'See what it is to be a politician's wife,' said the countess, turning to Hannah. 'All this forenoon I have been acting as amateur whipper-in to get votes for our side. Lord Dunsmore is desperately anxious about it, but very hopeful of the result. He will come straight home with the news; so I shall be most grateful of your company, Mr. Rivers, to congratulate my husband, if he wins—to condole if he fails. But as I said to my thane this morning, when I counselled him to go and murder, not King Law, but the tyrant Injustice—

"Screw your courage to the sticking-place,  
And we'll not fail."

She put the matter thus, with her consummate tact

and delicate kindliness, chattering gaily on, and not waiting for anybody to answer. And all day she kept them up with her gay, witty, continuous talk—a perpetual fountain of prettiness—never by word or look betraying that she guessed anything, or that anybody except herself had any anxiety for the result which this day must bring.

At dinner they were only three; but in the evening one or two people dropped in. Lord Dunsmore's house was always a sort of rendezvous to discuss what was going on in the House, especially when there was pending such a question as this, in which he was known to be strongly interested. His wife, too,—her enemies called her a female politician; but even they acknowledged that she pursued her unfeminine *métier* in a most womanly way, and that it was chiefly for her lord's sake, in whose projects she joined heart and soul.

'No,' she said, when all the comers and goers had left, and she sat waiting for Lord Dunsmore's return, trying in every way to make the time slip by for those other two to whom she talked fast, but scarcely looked at them. 'No; I hate the word party; I despise heartily those politicians who dare not think for themselves, but must vote as their leader bids them, just as much as I despise those feeble legislators who, as in this case, are afraid to do good, lest evil might come—to break a bad law, lest good laws might some day be broken. If I were a man, the only question I should ever ask myself would be—is this right or wrong? That once clear, I would risk the rest.'

'Would you?' cried Bernard, leaning forward, strongly excited. He had looked very ill all day—indeed he had owned to Hannah that he was not well, and that before he went home he meant to consult a doctor; but he had the true masculine dislike to be pitied and sympathised with in his ailments,

so she asked no more; only she watched him—his changing cheek, his nervous start at every opening of the door, with an anxiety she could not control.

And, as during a pause in his conversation with Lady Dunsmore he turned and asked Hannah rather irritably 'why she was so silent?' he little knew what a desperate resolve was forming in her mind, should certain combinations of circumstances force her to it—drive her into the carrying out of that principle, 'All for love, and the world well lost.' A resolve which no one would have expected possible for such a quiet woman as she.

Ten o'clock struck—eleven; it was near midnight.

'They are having a long debate; that looks well for our cause,' said Lady Dunsmore; and then a carriage was heard to drive up, and Lord Dunsmore's foot—he was a large, heavy, ponderous man, not easily moved, physically or mentally, but firm as a rock after he did move—was distinctly audible coming up-stairs.

His little bright wife flew to him. 'Oh, tell us—I mean, tell me—in two words——'

But he had caught sight of the other two, and looked for the moment as if he wished himself miles and miles away. Still he went up and shook hands with them with a noble affectation of carelessness.

'Pardon. Lady Dunsmore is so anxious about me and my affairs. Well, my dear, there is, unluckily, no news. We have failed this time—beaten: but by the smallest majority yet. Hope on, hope ever! Next session we shall have converted those heretics, and be sure to get our Bill through. If we fight on steadily we shall carry our point at last.'

'Of course we shall,' cried the countess, with a choke in her throat. 'No need to be downhearted. The right always wins. Cheer up, Dunsmore!'

And she patted him on the shoulder, never once turning her eyes—they glittered with tears, in spite of her gay tone—to the two behind her.

Hannah stood motionless. She had expected nothing, and was scarcely disappointed; but Bernard stepped forward excitedly.

‘Yes, yes, the right always wins. And you made a brilliant speech, Lord Dunsmore. I—I—congrat——’

An uncomfortable sound rose in his throat, as if he were struggling to articulate, and could not. Then he dropped down, and there was the piteous sight of a strong man swooning dead away. Hannah, as she fell on her knees beside him, and lifted his head, thought for the instant it was real death.

‘It has killed him,’ she said piteously. ‘He could not bear it—the suspense, I mean; and now—you understand?’

‘Yes, I have understood it all along,’ said Lady Dunsmore gently, and bade her husband lock the door, so as to prevent any one entering for a minute or two. ‘We will see after him ourselves. Look, he is reviving a little already!’

Bernard sighed. ‘O Hannah!’ he murmured, and stretched out his arms. She opened hers and took him into them, resting his head against her shoulder, so that he could breathe more freely, then looked up to her two friends.

‘You see how it is? We could not help it. And you do not think us wrong, I know.’

‘Wrong! Quite the contrary. And I always knew it would happen. Didn’t I tell you so?’

That one little triumph—‘I told you so!’ The countess could not resist it; but after that she said no more—only helped Hannah, in the kindest and tenderest way, to restore the still half-conscious man. Bernard’s illness, however, seemed rather more than an ordinary fainting-fit. When he recovered he wandered in his talk, and scarcely seemed to know where he was.

Then Hannah took at once the motherly part



which seems natural to almost all women in cases of sickness—soothing him, tending him, and accepting for him all the arrangements which Lady Dunsmore immediately made, that he should remain in the house. Soon he was able to be half led, half carried, to his room.

‘Is it all right, Hannah? You will see that it is all right?’ said he helplessly, and when she answered him in her quieting voice he seemed satisfied, and submitted patiently.

But she had to submit to harder things. When, hearing him call her, she mechanically rose to follow him, Lady Dunsmore detained her.

‘Not you; my old housekeeper must be his nurse. Not you.’

‘But he wants me. He called me.’

‘Never mind. You cannot go. What would the world say?’

Hannah blushed horribly, then answered in a low, desperate voice, ‘I care nothing for the world. He is mine. You forget we are engaged; we were to have been married as soon as ever the law allowed. Nobody understands him as I do. Let me go.’

‘No,’ said her friend firmly. ‘He will be taken every care of; but your care he cannot have. For both your sakes, I will not allow it; the world is too wicked. And yet,’ she added, ‘the world has common sense on its side. No man or woman, not related, ought to have been to one another such close friends as you and he have been, unless they could be married. You must accept things as they are. I am not cruel to you, but kind.’

Hannah knew that. With a stolid patience she did accept her lot, submitting day after day, for a whole week, to the miserable suspense of only hearing second-hand tidings of Bernard’s state, of having rights and no rights, of being neither wife nor sister, yet having to endure the agonising anxiety of both.

Not alone, either, in her pain—for Bernard continually sent messages for her to come to him, and Lady Dunsmore would not let her go.

‘Cæsar’s wife,’ she said, ‘must not even be suspected. You are under my protection, and I will protect you to the utmost of my power; but you must also protect yourself. You must give no handle to the bitter tongues which are already beginning to wag about you.’

What tongues she did not state; but Hannah knew. By the manner in which she had often heard other people talked of at the Moat-House, she guessed well enough how the Moat-House would now be talking of her. And the plan which, in the wretchedness of being parted from him, she had already matured, and intended to propose to Bernard as soon as he got well—namely, that, adhering to the letter of the law, and risking all misinterpretation, she should go back with him to Easterham, and resume her place as his sister and housekeeper—faded into thin air.

‘You are right,’ said the countess, when they discussed, as they did openly now, the actual position of things, and what was the best course to take next. ‘Such a scheme would never do. The world would never believe in you or him. I can quite understand a woman, conscious of her own innocence, doing the most daring things; but there are things which she has no right to dare. No, my poor Hannah, if ever you are married, you must bring to your husband a spotless name; not a soul must be able to throw a stone at you. And there are those who would stone you to death if they could.’

‘I know that,’ said Hannah, sadly; ‘but perhaps they do not mean it. Don’t tell *him*; he loves them.’

So spoke she, and tried to believe the best—that circumstances were chiefly in fault, not individuals. But Lady Dunsmore was very angry, especially when, the ill-tidings about Bernard being necessarily sent to

Easterham, Bertha and Mrs. Morecamb rushed up, and bemoaned him, and exacted a promise from him that he would come home directly, and let himself be nursed at the Moat-House by his own people. That day he did not ask for Hannah—not once.

She sat in her room, and saw nothing of him—saw almost nobody, except the child. She was painfully aware that every person in the house, servants included, guessed her exact position with regard to Mr. Rivers, and watched her with the eager curiosity with which almost all people, good and bad alike, follow a domestic tragedy of this sort—a something which cannot be talked of openly, which has all the delightfulness of sin without its dangerous elements.

Thus, when Mr. Rivers at last came down to the drawing-room, Celestine, the countess's maid, ran into Miss Thelluson's room with the substance of half-a-dozen French novels written in her face, to communicate the event; assuring mademoiselle that monsieur was looking so much better than anybody expected, and she had heard him asking for her; and should she arrange mademoiselle's toilette to the best advantage before she went down-stairs?

But, when really summoned, Hannah crept rather than walked to her lover's presence. There was no joy, no eagerness in her face—only a kind of dreamy thankfulness—until they were alone together, and then he called her to his side.

'Hannah, it was not of your own will that you forsook me?'

'No, no!'

'And you love me still? You will not give me up even after what has befallen us? You understand? For another year, at least, there is no hope of our being married.'

'No.'

'Isn't it sad and strange—sad and strange?' he continued wistfully, as he lay on the sofa, she holding

his hand, for he was very feeble still. 'Here are we two, with every blessing under heaven—youth, health, freedom, money—nothing in the world to prevent our being happy; and yet, happy we cannot be. I see no way out of it. Do you?'

For a minute he looked as if he thought she might; but she shook her head, and kept her eyes down on the ground.

'Then the question is, What are we to do? I must go home directly, but it must be without you. Lady Dunsmore tells me so, and I think she is right.'

'I think so, too.'

'And parting from you, I must also part from my child. You know I promised you I would never claim the child, and I shall keep my word, though I shall miss her sorely. Pretty little Rosie! Still I will give her up—to you.'

'Thank you.'

And then, looking at him, the thanks seemed cruel—he was so worn, so weak, so joyless; and it was such a joyless, empty life that he was going back to. He was so helpless, too—the kind of man who always wants a woman to take care of him—to whom marriage is, domestically, not merely a comfort, but a necessity; and all his little weaknesses she knew—all his innocent wants she was accustomed to supply.

'Oh, you don't know how I have missed you!' said he, with an almost child-like complaining. 'Home has not been like home since you went away. There was nobody to do anything for me, or when they did it, they did it wrong. Nobody like Hannah. When shall I have you back again?'

'When, indeed?'

'And now, when I was ill—when, once or twice, I thought I was dying, and could not get at you—it was so hard. Will you promise'—he lifted himself up, and clutched her hand tight—'promise faithfully

that, if I am really dying, you will come to me, whatever the world says?’

‘I will;’ and he saw by her face that she would. ‘But you must not die,’ she added desperately; ‘you must get well as fast as ever you can. You must take the utmost possible care of yourself, for Rosie’s sake—and mine. Oh, Bernard! once I told you to part from me and go and marry another woman, but I could not do it now.’

He smiled, and tried to draw her closer to him; but she glanced at the door, and shrank away.

‘You don’t care for me—you are afraid of caring for me,’ Bernard said angrily.

‘I! not care for you!’

She wept; and, overcome by the weakness of illness, he wept too. It was cruelly hard for them both—as hard as that most pathetic line in the ballad—

‘We took but ae kiss, and we tore oursels away.’

But that ‘ae kiss’ of theirs had no sin in it—nothing but sorrow.

‘Hannah,’ implored he, ‘do not forsake me again. If you knew what a lost creature I am without you—to die without you, or to live without you, is equally dreadful. Can nothing be done? Oh, my dearest! can nothing be done?’

His eyes were so sad, his looks so wan. Even this comparatively trifling illness, following the long mental strain which he must have undergone, had broken him down so completely that Hannah was terrified. There came upon her that mortal dread which comes upon all who love, and most natural in her who had lived to see the grave close over all her nearest and dearest. What if, among all their cares, the one care they never contemplated were to happen? What if Bernard were to fall into ill-health, to sicken and die, and she still parted from him? What if, instead of the long lonely years which both had feared so much, there should be

allotted to one of them only a brief space of earthly life; was that space to be spent in separation? Would it not be better to clutch at the vanishing joy—to risk all things, and gain one another?

Under the agony of this fear Hannah was near giving way, and whispering a word or two—offering that fatal sacrifice which, however he needs it and craves it, no woman has a right to make to any man, not even though it may be one which, as in this case, involves no moral guilt, and concerning which her own conscience may be at ease entirely. For the sacrifice is not hers alone. He, too, is involved in it. Nor he only; but the solemn rights of creatures yet unborn—innocent beings who cannot plead and say, ‘Father, mother, why did you do this? why entail this misery upon us also?’

Whether, noble and pure woman as she was, the motherly heart in Hannah made her faintly hear those voices with a solemn prevision that no woman ought ever to blush for or to set aside—who knows?—but she hesitated. She could not be the first to propose that marriage abroad which secured nothing at home. Besides, so long as the law was the law, it ought not to be broken.

While she hesitated, Bernard, who had lain silent and thoughtful, said suddenly in a rather changed tone—the ‘worldly’ tone which she had sometimes remarked in him, the faint reflex of what was so strong in the rest of his family:—

‘Perhaps, after all, my going back to my parish work alone will be the most prudent course; for I may soon have to make some change in it, and indeed in all my outward surroundings. The girls told me that poor Austin has had another series of fits, worse than ever before. Most likely I shall be Sir Bernard before very long.’

He sighed—but it was not a heart-deep sigh; one could not expect it to be; and there was something

in his look which corresponded to that tone which always jarred upon Hannah. No, 'all for love, and the world well lost,' was not the creed of any Rivers; if Bernard tried it, the loss would not be by him quite unfelt. Would it by any man brought up as he had been, and with the nobler half of him never developed at all, till he fell in love with poor Rosa—till he afterwards walked into love deeply, deliberately, with such a woman as Hannah Thelluson?

Hannah left her passionate words unsaid, and continued their grave and anxious talk—listening to all the plans he made for her and Rosie, in which he showed the utmost thoughtfulness and tenderness. The most likely scheme, and one which Lady Dunsmore had herself suggested, was that, as the young Ladies Dacre were going to the sea-side for a little, Hannah should accompany them, or rather *chaperon* them, taking with her Rosie and Grace. This would be a quiet life, and yet not a life quite shut out from the world. No one could say she was 'hiding.'

'For you must not hide,' Bernard argued; 'we must not look as if we were ashamed of ourselves. And you must be somewhere where I can get at you—run down to see my child, of course, whenever it is practicable. Still you are best a little out of the way too, and not going much into society, for the thing is sure to ooze out.'

'How?'

'Oh, though my people pledged me to secrecy "for the honour of the family," I know what women's tongues are,' said Bernard, bitterly. 'Still, they dare not say or do much, seeing I shall be Sir Bernard some time! and then— But however things end, I had rather, whatever may be the curiosity of the world about you, that it was not gratified, but that you lived a rather secluded life. It is best, especially considering how you stand with respect to my family.'

'I comprehend you. Yes.'

‘Oh, Hannah, have I said anything to wound you? But I am placed as it were between two fires. What can I do?’

‘Nothing. Nor I. Fate is too much for us; we had better say good-bye for a time. Give me the child and let me go.’

And at the moment she felt as if she did not care where she went, or what was done to her. It was all pain; nothing but pain. In her sad life all its natural delights seemed turned into bitterness.

Bernard seized her hands—‘Tell me the whole truth. Tell me all that is in your mind about me, or against me,—which is it?’

Another minute and she might have said, not at all the tender words that a while ago she had meant to say, but others quite opposite,—words which might have placed an eternal barrier between her and the man she loved; who after all was only looking upon their position with a man’s eyes—always harder and more worldly than a woman’s.

But to save her the door opened, and there burst in, with a cry of delight, her Rosie—her ‘sunshiny child,’ as she often called her. The little thing, who had been with her papa every day for the last week, climbed upon him in an ecstasy, then turned to Hannah.

‘Tannie too, Tannie too! Papa and Tannie kiss Rosie. Both together!’

It was going back to the old ways; childhood and age are alike in clinging to old ways and resisting the smallest change.

‘You see,’ said Bernard, with a smile, ‘Rosie herself insists upon things being as they used to be—as they ought to be. Rosie herself delights in us “both together.”’

Hannah said nothing; but, clasping her darling, she laid her weight of secret pain upon the unconscious childish bosom which was already the receptacle and the comfort of half her woes.



‘I will go anywhere, and do anything that you and Lady Dunsmore think best, if I may only have Rosie with me. She’ll come, I know?’ And Hannah curled round her fingers the soft little rings of silky hair—baby hair which had never been cut, and which netted in its dainty meshes all her motherly heart. ‘Who loves poor Tannie? Who’s Tannie’s darling?’

‘No; papa’s darling,’ said the child with a pretty waywardness, and then relenting, came and laid her head in her aunt’s lap, repeating words which Hannah had forgotten ever having said to her, only she often murmured her soul out over the little crib at night; and Rosie’s observation was growing so sharp, and her memory so clear. ‘No, papa’s darling; Tannie’s blessing!’ Then with a little silvery mischievous laugh, ‘Blessed tild! Rosie blessed tild!’

Ay, she was a blessed child.

## CHAPTER XV.

ALONE, in a foreign land—with only a child for company and a servant for protection, this, in the strange vicissitudes of Hannah’s life, was her position now. Accidentally, rather than intentionally, for Lady Dunsmore had taken all care of her, and meant her to be met at Paris by Madame Arthenay, the lady to whom she sent her, and who, with herself, was the accomplice of Hannah’s running away.

For she had literally ‘run away’—by not only the concurrence, but the compulsion of her faithful friend, who saw that the strain was growing too hard to bear. Living within reach of Bernard’s visits, which were half a joy and half a dread, exposed to the continual gossip of Easterham—since, though the Moat-House had entirely ‘cut’ her, some of the other houses did

not, but continued by letter a patronising kindness most irritating—above all, suffering a painful inner warfare as to how far she was right in allowing Bernard to come and see her, since every time he came the cruel life of suspense he led seemed more and more to be making him—not merely wretched, but something worse: all these trials, in course of time, did their work upon even the strong heart and healthy frame of Hannah Thelluson.

‘You are breaking down,’ said the countess, when one day towards the Summer’s end she came to take her young folks home. ‘This cannot last. You must do as I once suggested—go quite away.’

‘I cannot!’ said Hannah, faintly smiling. ‘He would not let me.’ For she felt herself gradually succumbing to Bernard’s impetuous will, and to the strength of a passion unto which impediments seemed to have given a force and persistency that had changed his whole character.

‘Not let you go away? The tyrant! Men are all tyrants, you know. Very well. Then you must run away.’

‘He would follow me—as he once said he should—wherever I went.’

‘Indeed! Quite right of him. Still, as I object to tyranny, and as you will just now be much better without him than with him, I mean to help you to run away.’

‘But—the child!—he will miss her so. And I must have the child with me!’

‘Of course. But do you think when a man is desperately in love he troubles himself much about a child? Hannah—my dear old goose! you will be a goose to the end of your days. Go and cackle over your little gosling, and leave me to manage everything for you.’

Hannah obeyed, for she had come to that pass when her energies, and even her volition, seemed to have

left her. She submitted tacitly to the countess's plan, which was to send her quite out of England—to a far-away French town, Avranches, not easily reached, being beyond the limits of railways—where resided a dear old friend of Lady Dunsmore's, of whom she had often talked to Hannah—one Madame Arthenay.

'She will be the best protection you could have, for she herself married her sister's husband; as is constantly done in France, so no need of concealment, my dear. I shall just tell her everything. And you need not mind, even if Mr. Rivers does swoop down upon you some day—after his fashion. But he can't—Avranches is too far off. Nor will I let him, if I can help it. I shall tell him he must leave you in peace, to regain your strength and quiet your nerves. Good-bye now, and God bless you!'

The good countess, as she made this hurried farewell on board the French steamboat, left them. Almost before Hannah knew where she was, or what she had consented to, she found herself alone with Rosie and Grace. Lady Dunsmore did not say what deeper reason she had for thus effecting a temporary separation, sudden and complete, between the lovers, even though it involved what she called the 'kidnapping' of little Rosie. Knowing the world, and the men therein, a good deal better than her friend did, she foreboded for Hannah a blow heavier than any yet. That hapless elder brother, the present Sir Austin, was said to be in a dying state; and for Sir Bernard Rivers of the Moat-House, the last representative of so long a line, to contract an illegal marriage, in which his wife would be shut out of society, and his children held by law as illegitimate, was a sacrifice at which the most passionate lover might well hesitate. While, under these or any circumstances, for him to doom himself for life to celibacy, was scarcely to be expected.

Lady Dunsmore had come to know Mr. Rivers pretty well by this time. She liked him extremely—

as most women did—but her liking did not blind her to a conviction founded on a certain Scotch proverb: ‘As the auld cock craws, the young cock learns’—that, when he was put to the crucial test, the world and his own family might be too strong for Sir Bernard. Therefore, on all accounts, she was glad at this time to get Hannah out of the way. But her plans, too hastily formed, somehow miscarried; for at Paris her two friends contrived to miss one another. When Miss Thelluson reached Avranches it was to find Madame Arthenay away, and herself quite alone in that far-away place, with only Grace and the child.

At first this loneliness was almost pleasant. Ever since crossing the Channel she had felt lulled into a kind of stupor: the strange peace of those who have cut the cable between themselves and home, left all their burdens behind, and drifted away into what seems like ‘another and a better world.’ During her few days of travelling she had been conscious only of a sunshiny sky and smiling earth, of people moving about her with lively tongues and cheerful faces. Everything was entirely new, for she had never been abroad before, and whether the land was France or Paradise did not much matter. She had her child beside her, and that was enough.

She had Grace too. Many a servant is, in trouble, almost better than a friend; because a servant is silent—Grace was, even to a fault. Trouble had hardened her sorely. Even when, a few months before, the last blow had fallen, the last tie was broken between her and Jem Dixon—for their child had died—poor Grace had said only, ‘It is best. My boy might have grown up to blame his mother for his existence.’ Words which, when Hannah heard them, made her shiver in her inmost soul.

That the girl knew perfectly well her mistress’s position with respect to Mr. Rivers, was evident. When he came, the nurse abstained from intruding

upon them, and kept other intruders away, in a manner which, though, not obnoxiously shown, occasionally touched, sometimes vexed, but always humiliated Hannah. Still, in her sad circumstances, she was glad to have the protection of even this dumb watch-dog of a faithful servant.

Grace seemed greatly relieved when the sea rolled between them and England. 'It would take a good bit of time and trouble for anybody to come after us here,' said she, as they climbed the steep hill on the top of which sits the lovely tower of Avranches, and looked back on the long line of straight road, miles upon miles, visible through the green, woody country, which they had traversed in driving from Granville. 'It feels quite at the world's end; and, unless folk knew where we were, they might as well seek after a needle in a hay-rick. A good job too!' muttered she, with a glance at the worn face of her dear mistress, who faintly smiled.

'Nobody does know our whereabouts exactly, Grace. We have certainly done what I often in my youth used to long to do—run away, and left no address.'

'I'm glad of it, ma'am. Then you'll have a good long rest.'

She had, but in an unexpected way. They found Madame Arthenay absent, and her little house shut up.

'We must take refuge in the hotel,' said Hannah, with a weary look. 'It seems a pleasant place to lie down and rest in.'

It was; and for a few hours she lingered about with Rosie in the inn-garden; a green, shady, shut-in nook, with only a stray tourist or two sitting reading on its benches; full of long, low espaliers, heavy with Normandy pears. There were masses of brilliant Autumn flowers, French and African marigolds, zinnias, and so on—treasures that the child kept innocently begging for, with a precocious enjoyment of the jingle of rhyme. 'Give me pretty posie, to stick in Rosie

'little bosie!' Hannah roused herself, once or twice, to answer her little girl, and explain that the flowers were not hers to gather, and that Rosie must be content with a stray daisy or two, for she never exacted blind obedience where she could find a reason intelligible to the little wakening soul. But when, after a tear or two, Rosie submitted to fate, and entreated Tannie to 'come with Rosie find daisies—lots of daisies,' Aunt Hannah also succumbed.

'Tannie can't come; she must go to her bed, my darling. Poor Tannie is so tired.'

And for the first time in her life she went to bed before the child, laying her head down on the pillow with a feeling as if it would be a comfort never to lift it up any more.

After these ensued days—three or four—of which she never liked to speak much afterwards. She lay in a nervous fever, utterly helpless; and when, had it not been for the few words of French which Grace was able to recall—the Misses Melville having amused themselves once with teaching her—and the quickness, intelligence, and tender-heartedness of the inn servants—good, simple Frenchwomen, with the true womanly nature which is the same all the world over—things would have gone hard with Hannah Thelluson.

More than once, vague and wandering as her thoughts were, she bitterly repented having 'run away;' thereby snatching Rosie from her natural protector, and carrying her off into these strange lands, whence, perhaps, she might never be able to bring her back, but herself lie down to rise up no more. But by-and-by even this vain remorse vanished, and she was conscious of thinking about nothing beyond the roses on the chintz bed-curtains, and the pattern of the paper-hangings—birds of paradise, with their sweeping tails; the angle which the opposite house made against the sky, the curious shape of its tiling,

and the name of the *boutiquier* inscribed thereon, the first few letters of which were cut off by her window-ledge. So childish had her mind grown, so calmly receptive of all that happened, however extraordinary, that when one day a kind-looking elderly lady came into her room, and began talking in broken English to Grace and the child, and to herself in the sweetest French she ever heard, Hannah accepted the fact at once, and took scarcely more than half a day to get quite accustomed to Madame Arthenay.

She was one of those women, of whom France may boast so many, as unlike our English notion of a Frenchwoman as the caricatures of John Bull who strut about on the French stage are like a real Briton. Feminine, domestic, though, after having brought up two families, her sister's and her own, she now lived solitary in her pretty little nest of a house; a strict, almost stern Protestant; pure alike in act, and thoughts, and words,—you would hardly have believed she was born in the same land or came of the same race as the women who figure in modern French novels, or who are met only too often in modern Parisian society. As Grace said of her after she had gone, ‘Ma’am, I don’t care how often she comes to see you, or how long she stays. She doesn’t bother me one bit. She’s just like an Englishwoman.’

—Which Madame Arthenay certainly was not, and would have smiled at the narrow-judging, left-handed compliment. But she was a noble type of the noblest bit of womanly nature, which is the same, or nearly the same, in all countries. No wonder Lady Dunsmore loved her, or that, as she had prophesied, Hannah loved her too; in a shorter time than she could have thought it possible to love any stranger, and a foreigner likewise.

‘Strangers and foreigners, so we each are to one another,’ said the French lady early one morning, after she had sat up all night with Hannah—to give

Grace a rest. 'And yet we do not feel so; do we? I think it is because we both belong to the same kingdom—the kingdom of God.'

For underneath all her gaiety and lightness of heart, Madame Arthenay was a very religious woman—as, she told Hannah, 'we Protestants' generally were; thoroughly domestic and home-loving likewise.

'It is a mistake to suppose that we French all fall in love with one another's wives and husbands, or that we compel our children to make cruel *mariages de convenance*, as you English fancy we do. My sister's was a love-marriage, like mine, and all my children's were. You would find us not so very different from yourselves if you once came and settled among us. Suppose you were to try.'

So said she, looking kindly at her; but though, as both knew, she had been told everything, this was the first time Madame Arthenay had made any allusion to Miss Thelluson's future or her own past. Besides, they did not talk very much, she speaking chiefly in French, which Hannah found it an effort to follow. But she loved to read the cosmopolitan language of the sweet eyes, to accept the good offices of the tender, skilful, useful hands. Years afterwards, when all its bitterness, and pain, and terror had died out, the only thing she remembered about that forlorn illness in a far-away French town, was the kindness of all the good French people about her, and especially of Madame Arthenay.

But when she was convalescent, Hannah's heart woke up from the stupor into which it had fallen. She wanted to get well all in a minute, that she might have back her little Rosie, who had been spirited away from her by those compassionate French mothers, and was turning into *une petite Française* as fast as possible. Above all, she craved for news from home: it was a fortnight now since she had had one word—



one line. She did not wish—nay, she dreaded—to have a letter from Bernard; but she would have liked to hear of him—how he took the news of her flight, whether he was angry with her, and whether he missed his child. But no tidings came, and she did not want to write till she was better. Besides, Madame Arthenay took all the writing things away.

‘You are my slave, my captive; Madame la Comtesse exacts it,’ said she in her pretty French. ‘You are not to do a single thing, nor to stir out of your room until I give you leave, which will likely be to-morrow. And now I must bid you adieu, as I have a friend coming who will stay the whole day. Could you rest here quiet, do you think, and spare me an hour of Grace and Rosie? I should like to show my friend the little English rose.’

Hannah promised vaguely, and was left alone; to study as heretofore the flowers on the chintz and the long-tailed birds on the wall. She was getting very weary of her imprisonment—she who had never before been confined to her room for a whole week. It was a lovely day; she knew that by the bit of intensely blue sky behind the house-tiles opposite, and the soft, sweet air that, together with the cheerful street noises of a foreign town, entered in at the open window. A longing to ‘rise up and walk’ came over her—to go out and see what could be seen; above all, to catch a glimpse of that glorious view which she had noticed in coming up the hill—the sea-view, with Mont St. Michel in the distance; that wonderful rock castle, dedicated to her favourite angel (in the days when she was a poetical young lady she always had a statue of him in her room), St. Michael, the angel of high places, the angel who fights against wrong.

It was a vagary, more like a school-girl than a grown woman; but Hannah could not help it. She felt she must go out—must feel the fresh air and

sunshine, and try if she could walk, if there was any remnant of health and strength left in her; for she would need both so much.

She was already dressed, for she had insisted upon it. Searching for her bonnet and shawl, and smiling with a pathetic pleasure to find she really could walk pretty well — also wondering, with childish amusement, as to whether, if Grace met her, she would not take her for a ghost — Hannah stole down through the quiet hotel, and out into the street — that picturesque street of Avranches which leads towards the public gardens, and the spot where, within six square feet, is piled up the poor remnant of its once splendid cathedral.

Madame Arthenay had described it, and the various features of the town, during the gentle, flowing, unexciting conversation which she pertinaciously kept up by the invalid's bedside, so Hannah easily found her way thither; tottering a little at first, but soon drinking in the life-giving stimulus of that freshest, purest air blowing on a hill-top from over the sea. All her life, Hannah had loved high places; they feel nearer heaven somehow, and lift one above the petty pains and grovelling pleasures of this mortal life. Even now, weak as she was, she was conscious of a sensation of pleasure, as if her life were not all done. She wandered about, losing her way, and finding it again; or amusing herself by asking it of those kindly, courteous French folk who, whenever they looked into her face, stopped and softened their voices, as if they knew she had been ill and in trouble. One of them — a benign-looking old gentleman, taking the air with his old wife, just like an English Darby and Joan — civilly pointed out to her the Jardin des Plantes as being a charming place to walk in, where madame would find easy benches to repose herself upon, and a sea-view, with Mont St. Michel in it, that was truly 'magnifique.' Madame's own beautiful island could

furnish nothing finer. Hannah smiled, amused at the impossibility of passing for anything but an English-woman, in spite of her careful French, and went thither.

It was a beautiful spot. Sick souls and weary bodies might well repose themselves there, after the advice of the good little fat Frenchman—how fat Frenchmen do grow sometimes! The fine air was soft as cream and strong as wine, and the cloudless sunshine lay round about like a flood; over land and sea—the undulating sweep of forest country on the right hand, and on the left the bay, with its solitary rock—fortress, prison, monastery—about which Madame Arthenay, in her charming small-talk, so fitted for a sick-room, had told stories without end.

Involuntarily, Hannah sat and thought of them now, and not of her own troubles; these seemed to have slipped away, as they often do in a short, sharp illness, and she woke refreshed, as after a night's sleep, able to assume again the burden of the day. Only she lay and meditated, as one does before rising, in a dreamy sort of way; in which her old dreams came back to her. Looking at that lonely rock, she called up the figure of her saint—the favourite St. Michael of her girlhood, with his head bent forward and his sweet mouth firmly set; his hands leaning on his sword, ready to fight, able even to avenge, but yet an angel always; and there came into her that saving strength of all beaten-down, broken-hearted creatures—the belief, alas! often so faint—that God does sometimes send His messengers to fight against wrong; not merely to succour, but absolutely to fight.

‘No, I will not die—not quite yet,’ she said to herself, as in this far distant nook of God’s earth, which seemed to have His smile perpetually upon it, she thought of her own England, made homeless to her through trouble and bitter with persecution. ‘Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! Here, perhaps, I

might find rest. But still I will not die. They shall not kill me. They may take my character away—they may make him forsake me, as I daresay he will; but I have strength in my soul, nevertheless. And I will fight against their cruelty—I will protest to the last that I had a right to love him, a right to marry him; that it would have been the best thing for him, for me, and the child. O my Bernard! there is a deal of the angel in you; but if there were more of the St. Michael—if, instead of submitting to wrong, you could take up your sword and hew it down——But you cannot. I know, when the time comes, you will forsake me. But still—still—I shall have the child.’

Thus sighed she; and then, determined to sigh no more, to complain no more, to any living creature, but to do her best to get health and strength of body and mind, Hannah rose up from the heap of stones where she had been sitting. With one fond look at that glorious picture which lay below her—earth, sea, and sky, equally beautiful, and blending together in the harmony which soothes one’s soul into harmony too—she turned her steps homewards; that is, ‘chez elle,’ for to poor Hannah Thelluson there was not—would there ever be?—such a thing as home.

As she went she saw a figure coming towards her, walking rapidly, and looking round, as if searching for some one. Had it been possible—or, rather, had not the extreme improbability of such a thing made her stop a minute, and draw her hand across her eyes, to make sure that imagination was not playing her false—she would have said it was Bernard.

He saw her likewise; and the two ghosts—for strangely ghostly they both looked to one another’s eyes—met.

‘Hannah! how could you——’

‘Bernard! O Bernard!’

She was so glad to see him—he could not help finding it out; nor did she try to hide it—she was too

weak. She clung to his arm, her voice choking, her tears falling fast—tears of pure helplessness, and of joy also. He had not forsaken her.

‘How could you run away in this manner? We have been searching for you—Madame Arthenay, Grace, and I—for hours.’

‘Not quite hours,’ said she, smiling at last. ‘It was fully one o’clock when I left my room. Was that what you meant by my running away?’ For she was half afraid of him, gentle as he seemed, and wished to have the worst over at once.

Bernard shook his head.

‘I cannot scold you now. I am only too happy to see you once again, my darling.’

He had never called her so before; indeed, she was the sort of woman more to be honoured and loved in a quiet, silent way than fondled over with caressing words. Still the tenderness was very sweet to have—sweeter because she felt so miserably weak.

‘How did you find me out?’ she said, as they walked up the town. And it seemed as if now, for the first time, they were free to walk together, with no cruel eyes upon them, no backbiting tongues pursuing them.

‘How did I find you? Why, I tracked you like a Red Indian. Of course I did—I would to the world’s end! What else did you expect, I wonder?’

Hannah hardly knew what she had expected—what feared. In truth, she was content to bask in the present, with a passionate eagerness of enjoyment which those only know who have given up the future hopelessly and entirely.

In the course of the day she grew so rapidly better that, when Bernard proposed going for an hour or two to the house of Madame Arthenay, she assented. He seemed quite at home there—‘flirted’ with the sweet old French lady in the most charming manner. He had been with her since yesterday, she said; and was

indeed the 'friend' to whom she wished to show the little English Rose.

'Monsieur speaks French like a Frenchman, as he ought, having been at school at Caen, he tells me, for two years. He does credit to his Norman blood.'

Which Madame Arthenay evidently thought far superior to anything Saxon, and that the great William had done us Britons the greatest possible honour in condescending to conquer us. But Hannah would not smile at the dear old lady, whom, she saw, Bernard liked extremely.

Soon they settled amicably and gaily to the most delicious of coffee, and the feeblest of tea, in Madame Arthenay's cottage—a series of rooms all on the ground-floor, and all opening into one another and into the garden—salon, salle-à-manger, two bed-chambers, and a kitchen; half of which was covered by a sort of loft, up which the one servant—a faithful old soul, who could do anything and put up with anything—mounted of nights to her bed. A *ménage* essentially French, with not a fragment of wealth or show about it; but all was so pretty, so tasteful, so suitable. It felt like living in a bird's nest, with green leaves outside and moss within—a nest one could live in like the birds, as innocently and merrily—a veritable bit of Arcadia. Mr. Rivers said so.

'Ah, you should come and live among us,' said Madame Arthenay. 'In this our Normandy, though we may be a century behind you in civilisation, I sometimes think we are a century nearer than you are to the long-past golden age. We lead simpler lives, we honour our fathers and mothers, and look after our children ourselves. Then, too, our servants are not held so wide apart from us as you hold yours. Old Jeanne, for instance, is quite a friend of mine.'

'So is Grace,' Hannah said.

'Ah, yes; poor Grace! she one day told me her story.' And then turning suddenly to Bernard, 'I

assure you we are very good people here in Normandy. You might like us if you knew us. Monsieur Rivers, why not come and settle among us, and resume the old name, and be Monsieur de la Rivière?’

Bernard started, looked earnestly at her, to see if any deeper meaning lurked under her pleasantry.

‘Take care,’ he said; ‘many a true word is spoken in jest.’ And then he suddenly changed the conversation, and asked about an old Château de Saint Roque, which some one had told him was well worth seeing, and might be seen easily, as it was on sale.

‘I know the present owner, a Lyons merchant, finds it dull. He bought it from the last propriétaire, to whom it had descended in a direct line, people say, ever since the Crusades; and—such a curious coincidence, Monsieur—the family were named de la Rivière. Who knows but you may be revisiting the cradle of your ancestors? If Miss Thelluson is able, you ought certainly to go and see it.’

Bernard assented, and all was soon arranged. He was in one of his happiest moods, Hannah saw. He, like herself, felt the influence of the sunshiny atmosphere, within and without, in this pleasant nook of pleasant France—the distance from home-sorrows, the ease and freedom of intercourse with Madame Arthenay, who knew everything and blamed nothing. When, next day, they all met, and drove together across the smiling country, amusing themselves with the big, blue-bloused Norman peasant, who kept cracking his long whip and conversing with his horses in shrill patois that resounded even above the jingle of their bells, Hannah thought she had seldom, in all the time they had known one another, seen him looking so gay.

Saint Roque was one of those châteaux of which there are many in Normandy, built about the time of the Crusades—half mansion, half fortress. It was situated in a little valley, almost English in its cha-

racter, with sleepy cows basking in the meadows, and blackberries—such blackberries as little Rosie screamed at with delight, they were so large and fine—hanging on the hedges, and honeysuckle, sweet as English honeysuckle, perfuming every step of the road. Suddenly they came upon this miniature mediæval castle, with its four towers reflected in the deep clear water of the moat which they crossed by a draw-bridge—and then were all at once carried from old romance to modern comfort, but picturesque still.

Hannah thought she had never seen a sweeter place. ‘I only wish I were rich and could buy it. I think I could live content here all my days,’ said she to the Lyons merchant’s wife, whom Madame Arthenay knew, and who, with her black-eyed boy clinging to her gown, politely showed them everything.

‘Did you mean what you said?’ whispered Bernard, eagerly. And then he drew back, and without waiting for her answer, began talking to Madame Arthenay.

That night when he took them safe to the hotel door, he detained Hannah, and asked her if she would not come round the garden with him in the moonlight.

‘The air is soft as a Summer night;—it will do you no harm. We may have no better chance of talk, and I want to speak to you.’

Yet for many minutes he said nothing. The night was so still, the garden so entirely deserted, that they seemed to have for once the world to themselves. In this far-away spot it felt as if they had left all the bitterness of their life behind them—as if they had a right to be lovers, and to treat one another as such. Bernard put his arm round her as they sat, and though there was a solemnity in his caresses, and a tender sadness in her reception of them, which marked them as people who had known sorrow, very different from



boy and girl lovers, still love was very sweet—implying deep content, thankful rest.

‘Hannah,’ he said at last, ‘I have never yet scolded you properly for your running away—with Lady Dunsmore aiding and abetting you. She would scarcely tell me where you were, until I hinted that, as a father, I had a right to get possession of my child. Why did you do such a thing? You must never do it again.’

She laughed, but said nothing. In truth, they were both too happy for either anger or contrition.

‘Dearest,’ he whispered, ‘we must be married. I shall never have any rest till you are wholly and lawfully mine.’

‘O Bernard! if that could ever be.’

‘It shall be. I have been talking to Madame Arthenay about it, as Lady Dunsmore charged me to do. She loves you well, Hannah; and the dear old French lady loves you too already. Everybody loves you, and would like to see you happy.’

‘Happy!’ And it seemed as if happiness would never come any nearer to her than now, when she sat as if in a dream, and watched the moon sailing over the sky, just as she had done in her girlhood and ever since, only now she was lonely no more, but deeply and faithfully loved:—loving, too, as she never thought it was in her to love any man. ‘Happy! I am so happy now that I almost wish I could die.’

‘Hush!’ Bernard said, with a shiver. ‘Come down from the clouds, my love, and listen to me—to my plain, rough, common sense, for two minutes.’

Then he explained that the jest about his becoming Monsieur de la Rivière was not entirely a jest—that in talking with Madame Arthenay she had told him how, upon giving notice to the French Government and residing three years in France, he would become a naturalised French citizen, enjoying all the benefits of French laws, including that which, by obtaining a

'dispensation'—seldom or never refused—legalises marriage with a deceased wife's sister. And such a marriage, Madame Arthenay believed, being contracted by them in the character of French subjects, would be held legal anywhere, as her own had been.

A future the bare chance of which made Hannah feel like a new creature. To be Bernard's happy, honoured wife, Rosie's rightful mother; to enter joyfully upon that life which to every home-loving woman is the utmost craving of her nature: she could hardly believe it true, or that, if possible, it had not been thought of before. Until a sadder thought occurred to her.

'What does "naturalisation" mean? Becoming a Frenchman?'

'Yes. Also that I must "change my domicile," as lawyers call it, publicly and permanently; let it be clearly known that I never mean to live in England again.'

'Never again? That would involve giving up much. How much?'

'Everything!' he answered bitterly. 'Home, friends, profession, position; all the ambitions I ever had in my life, and I have had some. Still,' added he—was it tenderly or only kindly?—as if he feared he had hurt her, 'still, Hannah, I should have you.'

'Yes,' said Hannah, and fell into deep thought.

How much is a woman to a man—say, the noblest woman to the best and truest man? How far can she replace to him everything, supply everything? A great deal, no doubt; and men in love say she can do all. But is it true? Does after-experience prove it true? And, it must be remembered, that in this case the woman's experience of the man was close, domestic: more like that which comes after marriage than before. She knew Mr. Rivers perfectly well, as a brother, before she ever thought of him as anything else. Loving him, she loved him open-eyed, seeing all his weak as well as his strong points as clearly as he saw hers.

Hannah was neither an over-conceited nor an over-humble person. She knew perfectly well her own deserts and requirements — Bernard's too. She was well aware that the ties of home, of kindred, of old associations, were with him passionately strong. Also, that he was, as he said, an ambitious man; that the world had a larger place in his heart than it had ever had in hers. She began to tremble.

'Tell me,' said she, 'tell me the exact truth. Do you think you could do this? Would it not be a sacrifice so painful, so difficult, as to be almost impossible?'

'You are right,' he answered, in a low voice and turning his head away; 'I fear it would be impossible.'

Hannah knew it, and yet she wished he had not said it. To her, with her ideal of love, nothing, except sin, would ever have been found impossible.

They sat silent awhile. Then Bernard, assuming a cheerful tone, continued —

'But, my dearest, there is a medium course. Why should we not, without being absolutely naturalised, take up our abode in France, where such marriages as ours are universally recognised? We might live here the greater part of the year, and only go to England occasionally. Even then we need not mingle in English society. We would live in London, or anywhere. The curate I have lately taken would be left in charge of my parish, so that I need scarcely ever go to Easterham.'

'That means,' Hannah said slowly, 'that you could never take me to Easterham. Our marriage, after all, would be like the other foreign marriages of which we have spoken, which at home are no marriages at all. Abroad I might be held as your wife; in England I should be only ——'

'No, no, no!' broke in Bernard impetuously; 'do not wound me by the cruel word. It is not true.

People could not be so harsh, so wicked. And if they were, why need we care, when our own consciences are satisfied? Oh, my love, my love, why cannot we be happy? Is it not right to be happy in this short, sad life of ours, which may end at any time? Besides,' and his voice altered so that Hannah scarcely knew it, 'you are not aware what harm you are doing me. This suspense drives me nearly wild. I can settle to nothing, accomplish nothing. My life is wasting away. I am growing a worse man every day; more unworthy of you, of my child, of'—here he stopped and looked upwards solemnly—'of her whom I never forget, my child's mother. Oh, Hannah, listen to me this once, this last time. Let us do what hundreds have done before us—marry abroad, and take all risks at home. For God's sake marry me—here, and at once!'

It was an awful struggle. Worse even than that which she had gone through when he was ill, and of which he never knew. The questions she had put to herself then, she repeated now—arguing them over and over with a resolute will, that tried to judge everything impartially, and not with relation to herself at all. Other arguments, too, came back upon her mind, arguments belonging to the great conflict of her youth, of which this one seemed to be such a cruel repetition—with a difference. For the marriage with her cousin would have risked only physical evils, but no moral suffering or social disgrace to any human being; while this marriage, which the law would never recognise as such, risked much more. All her father had then said to her,—her dear dead father, so tender and wise,—of the rights of the unborn generation, of the cruelty of entailing upon them the penalty of our joy, if that can be true joy which is so dearly bought—seemed to return word by word, and burn themselves into her brain. With Rosie even, it might one day be a difficulty—when the young grown-up girl came to discover that her father's wife was not really his wife, but only

regarded as such out of courtesy or pity. And—what if Rosie should not always be the only child?

Sitting there, Hannah shuddered like a person in an ague; and then all feeling seemed to leave her, as if she were a dead woman, unconscious of the living arms that were trying to warm her into life.

‘You are agitated, my own love!’ Bernard whispered. ‘Take time; do not answer me quickly. Think it well over before you answer at all.’

‘I have thought it over,’ said she, looking mournfully in his face, and clinging to his hands, as those cling who know they are putting away from them every happiness of this world. ‘Not now only, but many a time before, I have asked myself the same question, and found the same answer. No, Bernard, for God’s sake, as you say, which includes all other sakes, I will *not* marry you.’

Perhaps they ought to have parted then and there, —Hannah thought afterwards it had been better if they had; kinder to him and to herself if she had fled away on the spot, nor remained to have to endure and to remember those bitter words which miserable people speak in haste, and which are so very hard to be forgotten afterwards—words which are heard afterwards like ghostly voices in the silence of separation, making one feel that a parting, if it must be, had better be like an execution—one blow, severing soul and body; then, nothingness.

That nothingness, that quiet death, that absence of all sensation, which she had felt more than once in her life after great anguish, would have been bliss itself to the feeling which came over her when having pleaded his utmost, and reproached her his worst, Bernard rose up, to part from her in the soft moonlight of that pleasant garden, as those part who never mean to meet again.

‘My wife you must be—or nothing,’ he had said passionately, and she had answered with an icy con-

viction that it must be so—that it had best be so. ‘Yes, that is true; a wife or nothing.’ And then the lurking ‘devil,’ which we all have in us, liable to be roused on occasion, was roused, and she said a few words which, the next minute, she would have given worlds to have left unsaid. For the same minute there came to him, put into his hands by Madame Arthenay’s Jeanne, a letter, an English letter, with a broad black edge.

Bernard took it with a start—not of sorrow exactly, but of shocked surprise.

‘I must go home at once. In truth, I ought never to have left home, but I thought of nothing, remembered nothing, except you, Hannah. And this is how you have requited me.’

‘Hush, and read your letter.’

She dared not look over his shoulder and read it with him—dared not even inquire what the sorrow was which she had now no right to share.

Nor did he tell it; but, folding up the letter, stood in deep thought for a minute or two, then turned to her coldly, as coldly as if she had been any stranger lady, to whom he gave the merest courtesy which ladyhood demanded from a gentleman,—no more.

‘I must beg you to make my excuses to Madame Arthenay, and tell her that I am summoned home—I can hardly say unexpectedly, and yet it feels so. Death always feels sudden at last.’

He put his hand over his eyes, as if he were trying to realise something, to collect himself after some great shock. Hannah said a broken word or two of regret, but he repelled them at once.

‘No; this death needs no condolence. It is no sorrow—if death ever is a sorrow so bitter as life, which I begin to doubt. But it alters everything for me, and for Rosie. Poor Austin is gone—I am Sir Bernard Rivers.’

Was there pride in his tone—that hard, bitter

pride which so often creeps into a heart from which love has been ruthlessly driven? Hannah could not tell; but when they parted, as they did a few minutes after, coldly shaking hands like common acquaintances, she felt that it was really a parting, such a one as they had never had before; a separation of souls which in all this world might never be united again.

## CHAPTER XVI.

‘THIS is the end—the end of all.’

So Hannah said to herself when Bernard had left, and she realised that they had truly parted—parted in anger and coldness, after many bitter words spoken on both sides. She repeated it, morning after morning, as days went wearily by; and no letter came—he who was always so punctual in writing. Evidently then he meant the parting to be final. He had thrust her entirely out of his new life, in which she could henceforward have no part or lot.

This, under the circumstances, was so inevitable that at first she scarcely blamed him. She only blamed herself for not having long ago foreseen that out of their utterly false position no good end could come; no end but that, indeed, which had come. She had lost him in every relation—as lover—as brother—even as friend. It was sure to be—sooner or later; and yet when the blow did fall, it was a very heavy one, and many times a-day she bent under the weight of it in complete abandonment of sorrow.

Not for long, however; women with children cannot afford to grieve for long. The very first morning, when she had to explain to Rosie that papa was gone away home, and would not come back again for a good while (she did it in Grace’s presence, who opened

wide eyes, but said nothing), there was something in the bright face of her 'sunshiny child' which soothed her pain. And when, in the strange way that children say the most opportune as well as inopportune things, Rosie sidled up to her, whispering, 'Tannie not going away and leave Rosie. Tannie never leave Rosie'—she clasped her to her breast in a passion of tenderness, which was only checked by Rosie's distressed discovery of 'Tannie tying.'

Of course Tannie immediately dried her eyes, and cried no more—in the child's sight, at any rate.

Nor in anybody's sight, for she was one of those who find it not only best, but easiest, to 'die and make no sign.' Uncovering her wounds would only have made them bleed the more. Besides, what good would it have done? What help could come? Unless the law was altered, the only possibility of marriage for her and Bernard lay in that course which Madame Arthenay had suggested, and which he, with his strong English feeling, and the intensity of all his home affections and associations, had at once set aside as 'impossible;' and knowing him as she did, Hannah agreed that it was impossible. But she would not have him judged or criticised by others who knew him less than she. If there was one little sore place in her heart, she would plaister it over—hide it until it was healed.

Therefore, when Madame Arthenay came as usual, she delivered, in carefully-planned phrases, the message Sir Bernard had left; and though the good old lady looked surprised, and evidently guessed—no woman with common womanly penetration could help guessing—that something painful had happened; still, as Hannah said nothing, she inquired nothing, but gave, with a tact and delicacy that won her new friend's love for her whole future life, the best sympathy that even old friends can give sometimes—the sympathy of silence.



They fell back into their old ways, and after a few days this brief, bright visit of Sir Bernard's might never have been, so completely did it cease to be spoken of. Sometimes in the midst of her innocent play, little Rosie would make a passing reference to 'papa,' which Aunt Hannah answered with a heart that first leaped wildly, and then sank down, aching with a dull, continual pain. Evidently, not even for his child's sake, would Sir Bernard write to her or have anything to do with her. He had pushed out of his new and prosperous life not only her, but poor Rosie, whom he had left without asking for one good-bye kiss. Even the father in him was destroyed by his wretched position with regard to herself, and would be more and more so as time went on. Perhaps it was better, even for that, that the end had come—that there could be no doubt as to their future relations any more. She thought so—she forced herself to think so—when at last the long-expected letter arrived. It was very brief; and he used to write whole sheets to her every week! And upon its courteously formal tone could be put but one interpretation.

‘MY DEAR HANNAH,—

‘I send the usual monthly cheque doubled, that you and my daughter may have every luxury that Avranches affords, and which, indeed, my new circumstances make desirable and necessary.

‘If you do not dislike the place, I should like you to winter there; and, with the friendship and protection of good Madame Arthenay, to try and make it your home—as much home as you can.

‘I will say no more at present, being fully occupied with family affairs, and with others which time will disclose, but of which I do not wish to speak till they are more matured. In the meantime I remain always

‘Your sincere friend,

‘BERNARD RIVERS.’

That was all. No anger, no reproaches, no love. No, not a particle—of either lover's love or brother's love—of all that she had become so used to, gradually growing and growing, that how she should live on without it she did not know. Kind he was, kind and thoughtful still—it was his nature, he could not be otherwise—but all personal feeling seemed obliterated. It often happens so with men—at least Hannah had heard of such things—when thwarted passion suddenly cools down, like red-hot iron under a stream of water, and hardens into something totally unlike its old self; the impress of which it ever after retains. This is the only way of accounting for many things—especially for one thing which women cannot understand, that sudden marriage after a disappointed love, which is so common and so fatal.

Evidently he could not forgive her; could not restore her to even her old sisterly place with him. He had dropped her as completely out of his life as a weed out of his garden, now only an encumbrance and a reproach.

Well, so it must be. Hannah wondered how she ever could have expected anything else. She felt just a little sorry for herself—in a vague, abstract way—and fancied other people might be too, if they knew it all. Madame Arthenay, unto whom—to save all explanations—she gave Sir Bernard's letter—alas, all the world might have read it!—Lady Dunsmore, whose correspondence was as regular and affectionate as ever, but who now never mentioned the name of Rivers; and, lastly, poor faithful Grace, who followed her mistress with yearning eyes, doing everything that humble devotion could do to give her pleasure or to save her pain, but never saying one single word. These two Pariahs of society—as Hannah sometimes in her heart bitterly called herself and her servant—clung to one another with a silent trust which was a comfort to both.

But their greatest comfort was the child. Rosie flourished like a flower. Every day in her young life brought some new and wonderful development. That miraculous study of a growing human soul lay patent before Hannah every day, soothing, calming, and interesting her, till sometimes she became almost reconciled to her pain. It was not the sharp agony of youth—she was accustomed to sorrow—but this sorrow had come too late to be cured. She knew it would not kill her: but she also knew that it would last her life. She had been a long time in loving Bernard; but now that she did love him it was with a depth and intensity which those only know to whom love is the last remnant of that *dolce primavera*—that sweet heart-springtime—after which nothing can be looked for but winter and old age.

She wondered how her years would pass—the years which would make little Rosie into a woman. And she wondered very much about the child, how she should be educated, and where. Sir Bernard only spoke of their wintering at Avranches—having no further plans for Rosie's future; nor had he ever had any that Hannah knew of. He had seemed to take it for granted that they three—she, himself, and the child—would always be together, and that there was no need to decide anything. In what manner he might wish his daughter—an important personage now, as Miss Rivers of the Moat-House—to be brought up, Hannah had not the slightest idea.

However, one day, when they were driving through this smiling Norman country, where the long lines of poplars had not yet dropped a single leaf, and the quaint old trees of the endless apple-orchards stood each with a glowing heap of dropped fruit round its feet, made Rosie clap her hands in delight, the little woman herself settled that question.

‘Lots of apples! Rosie like apples. Rosie stay here always, and get lots of apples.’

A sentence which startled Hannah into deeper and more anxious thought than she had yet expended on her child's future. Truly her child's; she had now none of her own. She never for a moment deceived herself that to her happiness would ever come; that happiness which had fled from her all her life like a beautiful mirage. Only by the mercy of God, she had been made, as she sometimes thought, with that bitter laugh that is akin to tears, a rugged old camel, who could bear endless burdens, endure weariness and hunger and thirst. The desert would be crossed some day, and she should lie down and rest.

But in the meantime would it be good for Rosie to remain in France, ignorant of her English ties; ignorant, above all, of her father, whom already, with the easy forgetfulness of her age, she had ceased to speak about? What seemed at first a relief became to Hannah by-and-by a serious care.

Would she be quite right in binding Sir Bernard to the promise—which she knew he himself would never break—that Rosie should stay with her always? In the years to come might not this deprive both father and daughter of the greatest blessing of their lives?

Hannah remembered—in the utter blotting out of hope it was now doubly sweet to remember—how tenderly she had loved her own father; how after her mother's death she had been his constant companion and friend, with a tie so close that even his disapproval of the attachment between her and Arthur could not break it. This tie—the love between father and eldest daughter—Rosie would in all human probability never know.

Then, too, around Bernard, so young a man still, would soon spring up not only new interests, but new ties. She tried to fancy him Sir Bernard Rivers, master of the Moat-House—and what a noble master he would make!—beloved by all the country-side, bringing to

it in due time a new Lady Rivers, fair and sweet as his first wife had been, and perhaps raising up in honour and happiness a numerous family—Rosie's brothers and sisters—to whom poor Rosie would be even less than she was to her father—a stranger, an interloper, unto whom the dear associations of kindred blood were only a name.

Forecasting all this, seeing it, with a cruelly clear prevision, as the inevitable result of things, Hannah, even while she clasped her darling to her bosom, sometimes doubted whether hers was not a fatal love, which might one day overcloud, instead of brightening, the future of this her 'sunshiny child.'

'I may have to do it some time,' she said to herself, not daring even in thought to particularise what 'it' meant. 'But I can't do it yet—not yet. My one blessing—the only bit of blessedness left me in this world!'

And night after night, when she lay listening to the soft breathing, thanking God that her treasure was still hers, close beside her, looking to her, and her alone, for the providing of every pleasure, the defence from every ill that the innocent young life could know, Hannah wetted her pillow with her tears.

'I cannot do it; even if I ought, I cannot,' she moaned: and then let the struggle cease. She was not strong enough to struggle now. She rather let herself drift, without oar or sail, just where the waters carried her. Bitter waters they were, but she knew they were carrying her slowly and surely home.

In this dreamy state she remained during the whole of the brief, bright lull of the St. Martin's summer, which lasted longer than usual in Normandy this year, busying herself chiefly in planning pleasures for the two on whom life's burdens had either not yet fallen, or were near being laid down, the old lady and the child. With them, and Grace, she wandered everywhere near Avranches, and made herself familiar with

every nook of this pleasant country, which Bernard in his letter had suggested she should try to substitute for 'home.' Well, what did it matter? It was of little consequence where she and Rosie lived, so that they were far away from him. This must have been what he meant, and she accepted it as such.

With her usual habit of what he had sometimes called 'horrid resignation'—she had almost grown fond of the place, and even, in a sense, was happy in it, when one day there arose upon the strange, stupor-like peace of her daily life one of those sudden blasts of fate—like the equinoctial wind in which the St. Martin's summer ended—a storm noted in this neighbourhood for years, by the destruction which it had spread. Hannah never heard it spoken of afterwards without recalling that particular day, and all that happened thereon.

The hurricane had lasted for twenty-four hours, and was still unabated, when, restless with staying in-doors, she went out. Alone, of course—which was unusual; but any danger there might be must not happen to the child. For herself, she used once rather to enjoy danger, to exult in a high wind, as being something to fight against; but now, when she passed out of the town, and saw the desolation that a few hours had made—tall poplars, snapped like straws, lying prone at the road-side, apple-orchards in which there was scarcely a tree not mutilated, and many were torn up completely by the roots—she ceased to delight in the storm. She battled with it, however, as long as she could, though it was almost like beating against a stone wall, and then, unable to fight more, she sank, exhausted, in the first sheltered corner she could find.

'How weak I must be growing!' said poor Hannah to herself; and, catching sight of her favourite Mont St. Michel, the solitary rock, with its castled crown, looking seaward over its long stretch of sandy bay, the tears sprang to her eyes. Alas! there was no St.

Michael to fight for her—no strong archangel to unsheathe his glittering sword in defence of right or in destruction of wrong. She was a lonely woman, with not a creature to defend her—neither father, brother, husband, nor lover. Also, she was powerless to defend herself; she knew—she felt—that her fighting days were all done. That ghostly gleam of love and hope which had brightened her life, had passed away even like this St. Martin's summer, in storm and tempest, and would never come back any more.

Tired—so tired that she could scarcely crawl—Hannah retraced her steps, hastening them a little, as she found it was near post-time, and then smiling sadly at herself for so doing. What could the post bring her? Nothing, of course. Her last letter to Sir Bernard, a mere imitation of his own, acknowledging his money—which she had no conscience-stings about taking, for she spent it all upon Rosie—and agreeing to his proposal of their wintering at Avranches, had remained now three weeks unanswered. Better so, perhaps. Total silence was far less painful than such a correspondence.

There was one English letter—for Grace—which, as it bore the Easterham post-mark, she took to her herself, and lingered half involuntarily while it was opened and read.

‘No bad news, I trust?’—for Grace had uttered an exclamation, and seemed a good deal disturbed. ‘No harm happened to—to any one belonging to you?’

For though Grace now seldom mentioned Jem Dixon's name, they both knew that he was still at Easterham, slowly drinking himself to death—partly, he declared, because, since Grace left him, he had such a wretched home. Continually there was the chance of hearing that he had come to some ill end, and Hannah was uncertain how much Grace might feel it, or whether, in that case, she would not desire to go back at once to her sister's children, for whom she had had so strong an affection.

‘No, ma’am,’ she said, looking at Miss Thelluson, half inquisitively, half compassionately, ‘it’s no harm, so to speak, come to anybody. It’s only a wedding that they tell me of, a wedding I didn’t expect, and I’m very sorry for it.’

‘Of some friend or relation of yours? and you don’t quite like it, I see? Never mind, it may turn out better than you think; marriages sometimes do, I suppose.’

A commonplace, absently-uttered sentiment; but Hannah was often very absent now. Life and its interests seemed fading daily from her, as from people who are going to die, and from whom, mercifully perhaps, all the outer world gradually recedes, growing indistinct and colourless as at twilight time; but also calm—very calm. She could not rouse herself even into her old quick sympathy with other people’s troubles, though she saw that Grace was very much troubled about this letter, and continued so all day. Once upon a time the kind mistress would have questioned her about it, but now she took no notice, not till the two were together in the nursery, sharing the little bit of innocent fun with which Rosie always concluded their day. For Rosie was the drollest little woman at her bed-time, playing such antics in her bath, and carrying on the most amusing conversation while she ate her supper, that neither aunt nor nurse could forbear laughing. But to-night it was different, and the sharp little eyes soon detected that.

‘Look, Tannie,’ she whispered mysteriously, ‘Dacie tying. Dacie hurt herself p’raps. Poor Dacie tying.’

And in truth Grace, who stood behind her mistress and the child, had just wiped her eyes upon the towel she held.

‘No; I’m not hurt, dear, and it isn’t myself I’m crying for. Never mind me, Miss Rosie.’

‘But we do mind, don’t we?’ and Miss Thelluson put her hand kindly on the nurse’s shoulder as she



knelt. 'You shall tell me all about it presently. In the meantime, don't vex yourself more than you can help. Nothing in life is worth grieving for very much—at least, I often think so.' And Hannah sighed. 'We have but to do our duty, and be as content as we can. Everything is passing away—soon passing away.'

Grace's tears fell only the faster. 'It isn't myself, ma'am—oh, please don't think that I am not happy now. You are so kind to me, and then I have Miss Rosie; but what vexes me is this wedding I've heard about, and how people will take it, and——'

'Oh, I dare say it will all come right soon,' said Hannah listlessly, rocking her little one in her arms, and feeling that love and lovers and weddings were things belonging to a phase of existence as far back as the world before the flood. 'Who may the couple be? Anybody I know?'

Grace stopped a minute before she answered, and then said, dropping her eyes, 'Is it possible, ma'am, that you don't know?'

'How should I?'

'I thought—I have been thinking all day, surely he must have told you.'

'Who told me?'

'Master—Sir Bernard. It's his wedding that my sister tells me about. Oh, dear! oh, dear!'

All the blood in Hannah's heart stood still. Had it not been for the unmistakable meaning of Grace's sorrow, and the necessity of self-command that it enforced, she might have fainted; but her strong will conquered. She did not 'give way,' as women call it, by any outward sign.

'Sir Bernard married? There must be some mistake. He would, as you say, certainly have told me.'

'No; I didn't mean that he was exactly married; but that he is going to be. All the village says it.'

And to the last person I'd ever have thought he would marry — Miss Alice Melville.'

'Hush!' said Hannah, glancing at the child, for Rosie, already growing a dangerous little person to speak before, was listening with all her eyes and ears. Happily, in the silence into which his name had fallen, she had not yet learned to identify 'papa' with 'Sir Bernard,' so that as soon as she had got over her natural indignation at seeing aunt and nurse speaking of something which did not include her, who at this hour especially was always their sole object of attention, she curled sleepily down in Tannie's arms, a round little ball, with the pink toes sticking out from under the white nightgown—begging earnestly for '“Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie,” just once, once more.'

And Hannah sang it, without a mistake, which the small listener would have detected immediately; without a break in her voice either. For Grace also was listening—Grace who might go back to Easterham any day, and tell Easterham anything. Not that she thought Grace would; but she might. And now, above all, whatever Easterham guessed, it must never be given the slightest certainty that Sir Bernard had ever been aught to her except a brother-in-law.

Therefore Hannah laid Rosie peacefully in her crib, going through all the little ceremonies of tucking in and smoothing down, the 'one, one more 'ittle song,' and the 'two tisses,' which had been their mutual nightly delight for so long. Then she left her darling happy and at rest, and walked slowly down-stairs, Grace following. Thankfully would she have fled away, and hidden herself anywhere out of sight, but this could not be. So she looked steadily in her servant's face.

'Now, tell me all about this report concerning Sir Bernard.'

It was a very natural and probable one, as reports

go, and seemed to have been generally accepted at Easterham. The two were continually seen together at the Grange and the Moat-House, and it was said they only waited for their common mourning to end, in order to fix their wedding-day. More especially as many years ago, when they were mere boy and girl, they were supposed to have been fond of one another.

‘She was fond of him at any rate,’ Grace declared. ‘We servants all thought so when I lived at the Grange. She was a nice, pretty young lady, too. But she isn’t young now, of course; not pretty either; only she is very very good—capital about parish things and so on; and the kindest heart in the world to poor folks’ children. She was so kind to mine,’ added Grace with a sob.

Hannah again laid her hands soothingly on her servant’s shoulder, but with a strangely absent look.

‘Not young—not pretty—only very good. I know that. She would make a good wife to him, no doubt.’

‘Yes,’ said Grace, hesitating. ‘Only—who’d ever have thought of master’s wanting her? I didn’t, I’m sure. Why, nice as she is, she isn’t fit to hold a candle to —’

Hannah stopped her, terrified. ‘Hush, you forget yourself. Sir Bernard’s servant has no right to discuss his future wife. You will displease me exceedingly if you say another word on the subject.’

Had there been the slightest betrayal on Hannah’s part, the poor nurse’s heart would have overflowed. As it was, she was simply bewildered.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Thelluson. Us poor servants have no right, I suppose, to be sorry for our betters. But I was sorry, many a time, because I thought —’

‘Think nothing at all, say nothing at all, either to me or to any one. My sister has been dead three years; her husband is at perfect liberty to marry

again as soon as he chooses. And he could hardly marry a better person than Miss Melville. I am—very glad.’

‘Are you?’ said Grace, looking at her very earnestly. And then Hannah, driven to bay, and feeling the fierce necessity of the moment, looked back at Grace and, almost for the first time in her life, acted a lie.

‘Certainly. Why should I not be glad of my brother-in-law’s marriage?’

There was no answer, of course. Grace, completely puzzled, ventured no more; but putting the letter into her pocket, begged pardon once again, and, sighing, went away.

So far, then, Hannah was safe. She had borne the blow—nor allowed her servant to suspect what a death-blow it was; nay, she had even succeeded in concealing the fact that it had come upon her unawares. Poor innocent hypocrite! the lessons taught by the last bitter year and a half had not been lost upon her. But when Grace was gone she sat utterly paralysed.

Over and over again she had repeated to herself that all was at an end between her and Bernard; but she had never contemplated such an end as this. So sudden too—scarcely six weeks from the time she had parted from him—when he had been her ardent, despairing, desperate lover; furious because she would not sacrifice everything for him, as he said he was ready to do for her. And now he was quite ready to marry another woman. Could it be true? Was it probable—possible?

Something in Hannah’s secret heart whispered that it was: that his impulsiveness of temperament, his extreme affectionateness and corresponding need of affection, made a hasty marriage like this, to one whom he knew well, and who had always been fond of him, not incomprehensible even to her. And yet—and yet—

‘He might have waited—just a little while; have

mourned for me just for a few weeks—a few months—as he did for my poor Rosa.’

And her tears dropped fast—fast; not the scalding tears of youth, but very bitter tears nevertheless. She had loved him so well, had endured so much for him, had had such a bright dream of what she was to him. Could it have been only a dream? Would any other woman be just as dear to him as she? And though she did not faint, or shriek, or moan, or do any of those desperate things which tragic heroines are supposed to indulge in upon hearing of the marriage of their lovers; though she went to bed, and slept, and rose next morning just as if nothing had happened, still Hannah felt that something had happened—something which would make the world look never quite the same as it looked yesterday.

That yesterday was the last day she crossed the threshold for two whole weeks. The doctor said she ought not to have gone out in the high wind; that, out of health as she was before, it had caught her in some way, affected her breathing, smitten her at her heart. At which Miss Thelluson smiled. She knew she was ‘smitten to the heart.’

But it was very convenient—this illness. It saved her from all need of physical exertion, even of talking. She could just turn her face to the wall, and lie quiet, and do nothing. She felt for the first time in her life not the slightest inclination to do anything. Even when she rose from her bed the same incapacity continued, till sometimes Rosie’s innocent prattle was almost too much for her, and she felt herself turning sick and faint; and saw, with a dread indescribable, Madame Arthenay or Grace carry the child away from her, and keep her out of her sight for hours at a time.

What if, by-and-by, this were to be constantly the case? What if this condition of hers was the forerunner of long and serious illness—perhaps the con-

sumption which was said to be in the family, though in this generation her cousin Arthur had been its only victim? Suppose she were to fall sick and die? She began to have a feeling—was it sweet or sad?—that she *could* die, and that of mere sorrow. And, then, what would become of the child?

‘Oh, my Rosie, if ever there should come a time when you were left forlorn with nobody to love you, when you might blame poor Tannie for having stolen you and kept you away from all those who might have loved you! If ever Tannie should die!’

‘Tannie die? What’s dat? Rosie don’t like it!’ said the little thing, to whom she had been talking. She had two ways of talking to her darling. One which Rosie could perfectly comprehend: long conversations about flowers, and beasts, and people, and things, and all sorts of subjects in which the child’s intelligence was receptive to a degree that sometimes utterly amazed the grown woman. The other was a trick she had of speaking simply for her own relief, in a fashion that Rosie could not comprehend at all. But, baby as she was, she comprehended the anxious face, the tremulous voice; and repeated, with that pathetic droop of the lips that always foreboded tears, ‘Rosie don’t like it.’

Hannah changed her tone immediately. ‘Come here, my pet, Tannie won’t die then. She couldn’t afford it just yet. But listen a minute. Would Rosie like to go and see papa? Be papa’s girl again, and play about in the pretty garden, and the greenhouse, and the nursery? Rosie remembers them all?’

‘Yes,’ said the little decisive voice—Rosie never had the slightest doubt in her own baby mind about anything. ‘Rosie will go and see papa—soon, very soon. Tannie come too.’

Hannah turned away, and could not answer at first. Then she said, ‘But perhaps Tannie might not come too. Rosie would be content with papa?’

‘No,’—there was entire decision in this likewise—‘Rosie not go to papa unless Tannie come too. Rosie don’t want papa. Rosie will stop with Tannie.’

And the little woman, squatting down on Tannie’s pillow with an air of having quite settled the whole affair, turned her whole undivided attention to a doll whose eyes would open and shut, and who was much more interesting to her than any papa in the world.

But Rosie’s unconscious words aroused in her aunt a dread that had once awoke and been silenced: the fear that as time went on this complete severance would produce its natural result; the child would become indifferent to the father, and the father to the child. For, let people talk as they will about the ties of blood, it is association which really produces the feeling which is termed ‘natural affection.’ Deprived of this, and then deprived of herself, Rosie might in a few years be left as lonely a creature, save for money, as her Aunt Hannah once had been—ay, and was now, save for this one darling, the sole treasure saved out of her wrecked life. But was it lawfully and righteously hers?

There is a story, I believe a true one—most women will feel that it might have been true—of a Highland mother who, travelling from one glen to another, was caught in a snow-storm, and lost for twenty-four hours. When found—that is, her body was found—she had stripped off everything but her shift to cover the child. It was alive still, just alive; but the mother, of course, was dead.

Hannah Thelluson, as she lay awake all through this night, the first night that they brought back Rosie’s crib to its old place by her bedside—for she insisted she should sleep better if they did so—was not unlike that poor Highland woman.

Next morning she said, in a quiet, almost cheerful tone, ‘Grace, do you think you could pack up all our

things in a day? For I want, if possible, to go back to England to-morrow.'

'Go back to England!'

'Yes. What do you say to that, Rosie?' fixing her eyes on the child's face; and then, as a sudden gush blinded them, turning away, and contenting herself with feeling the soft cheeks and the rings of silky hair—as that Highland mother might have done when the death-mists were gathering over her eyes. 'Will Rosie go back, and see papa? and be papa's own little girl again? Papa will be so fond of her.'

'Yes,' assented the little oracle, and immediately proved her recollection of her father, and her lively appreciation of his paternal duties, by breaking her doll's head against the bed-post, and then saying in a satisfied tone, 'Never mind. All right. Rosie take dolly to papa. Papa will mend it.'

In a week from that time, travelling as fast as her strength allowed, yet haunted by a vague dread that it would not last her till she reached England, Hannah arrived in London.

Only in London, at an hotel; for she had no house to go to—no friend. Lady Dunsmore happened to be at a country seat; but, even if not, it would have been all the same. What she had to do no one could help her in—no one could advise her upon: it must be solely between herself and Bernard. And the sooner it was done the better. She felt this; more and more every hour. The struggle was growing frightful.

'I was right,' she said to herself, when, as soon as the need for exertion was over, she sank, utterly exhausted, and was obliged to leave to Grace the whole charge of everything, including the child, and lie, listening to the roll of endless wheels below the hotel window—as ceaseless as the roar of the sea, and as melancholy—'I was quite right! It is best to resign everything. I cannot trust myself any more.'



The first minute that her hands ceased from shaking, she wrote the decisive letter :—

‘DEAR FRIEND’ (she first put ‘Bernard,’ then ‘Brother,’ finally ‘Friend.’ He was that still ; at least she had never given him cause to be the contrary), ‘I have, against your wish, returned to England, though only for a few days’ stay, in consequence of having accidentally discovered the matter to which I suppose your last letter referred ; though, as you have never plainly told me, I will not refer to it here. But I think it ought to modify our future arrangements, which I should like to talk over with you. If you will come and see me here, me and Rosie, half-an-hour would, I think, suffice to decide all, and I could go back to France at once.

‘I remain, with every wish for your  
‘happiness in your new life,  
‘Your affectionate friend,  
‘HANNAH THELLUSON.’

After that she had nothing more to do but to wait, and watch day darken into night, and night brighten back into day—the dreary London day, all loneliness and noise—till Sir Bernard came.

He came earlier than she could have believed it possible. He must at once have taken a night train from Easterham, which he owned he had ; but, though he looked very tired, he was neither so agitated nor so confused as he might naturally have been under the circumstances.

‘Why in the world did you take such a journey, Hannah?’ was all he said, on entering ; then, perceiving Grace and the child, he stepped back, and caught his little daughter in his arms.

‘My pretty one ! Run away, nurse, and leave her to me. I want to have her all to myself. What, Rosie ! Has she forgotten papa ? Two tisses !—lots of tisses ! Papa’s darling ! Papa’s lamb !’

Of one thing Hannah was certain, Sir Bernard was unfeignedly glad to see his child. No lack of fatherly love, even though he was going to be married. It gave that poor heart which he had forsaken, a thrill of joy to see how tenderly he caressed his little 'lamb'—the motherless lamb that might have perished but for her, and which her care had now nurtured into a creature that, among any number of children, would be always the flower of the flock, so pretty had she grown, so winning, so clever, and, withal, such a good and loving child. Any father might be proud of Rosie. And as she clung about Sir Bernard, remembering all his old tricks with her, as if they had only parted last week, the two seemed perfectly happy together, and even like one another—with that strange family likeness which comes and goes in little faces, but which Hannah saw now as she had never seen before. Yes, Rosie was decidedly like him, and they would grow up to be a true father and daughter—one of the dearest and sweetest bonds that human nature can know.

She had quite forgotten herself—a trick she had, poor Hannah! in watching them and speculating upon them and their future—when she felt both her hands taken, one by her child's soft little fingers, the other by the strong clasp of a man.

'Hannah! can you forgive me? I have sometimes feared you never would.'

'What for?'

'For my unreasoning anger—my frantic love; above all, for having asked of you a sacrifice which no man should ask or accept from any woman. I knew this, felt it, the instant I came to my right senses, which was as soon as ever you were out of my sight; but it was too late to tell you so——. Forgive me. You will have no need to forgive me anything again.'

'I know that,' said Hannah, slowly, and waited for the next words he would say—words which would

surely be confirmation of all she had heard. So sure was she of it, that she did not withdraw her hand; she even, seeing that his manner was not agitated, but even cheerful, began to think whether now it would not be possible to go back, in degree, to their old cordial relations; whether he could not be again her brother-in-law—and Alice Melville's husband. Still something in her manner seemed to startle him.

'Know? What can you know? Not, surely, anything about these future plans of mine which, for both our sakes, I have carried out, unknown to you, until now?'

'Nevertheless, I have found them out,' said Hannah, with a faint smile. 'In these things, you see, a bird of the air often carries the matter. I am aware of it all.'

'Of all? Who could have told you? And what?'

'That you are going to be married.'

Sir Bernard started; then half smiled. But he offered not the slightest contradiction.

Hannah, perfectly convinced, conscious of only one wild impulse to get through what she had to say, that it might be all over and done, went on speaking.

'Married, as I hear, to Alice Melville, which is a choice that must satisfy everybody. That is the reason I came back to England. She is a good woman, who would be a good mother to my child. And I feel very weak and ill. I have been ill——'

'My poor Hannah! And you never told me?'

'Why should I? I only tell you now because it frightens me about Rosie's future. She ought to have safer protection than mine. She ought to have a brighter life than any I can give her. So I came to say'—Hannah drew her breath hard and fast—'if you want her back, I will give her up—to you and Alice. Only, first—I must speak to Alice—must make her promise——'

Just then tiny fingers ringed themselves round

Hannah's cold hand, against which Rosie laid her cheek, in a caressing way she had. It was too much—the strong heart altogether gave way, and she sat down sobbing.

Sir Bernard had listened, quite confounded at first, then silently watched her.

‘O Hannah, you good, good woman!’ was all he said, and taking out of her arms little Rosie, now sobbing as piteously as she, disappeared from the room with the child.

Then it was really true, this marriage: he did not deny it. And he accepted her sacrifice of her darling. Well, once made, she could not retract it, even had she desired to do so. But she did not desire. She only wished to see Rosie safe, and then go away and die. This once, once more, for the last time in her life, she accepted the inevitable. It was God's will, and it must be.

Long before Sir Bernard came back she had dried her eyes, and waited, as she thought she ought to wait, for anything he had to say—any final arrangements they might require to make. There was a chair opposite, but he sat down beside her, and took her hand.

‘Hannah, I want to speak half-a-dozen quiet words to you, which I should not have said till Spring; but I had better say them now. It is quite true I am going to be married, and as soon as I possibly can. I am not fitted for a lonely life. Mine will be worthless to myself, my fellow-creatures, my God, unless I accept the blessing He offers me, and marry the woman I love. But that woman is—not Alice Melville’

‘Not Alice Melville!’

‘How could you ever think it was? She is very good, and we are fast friends—indeed, she has advised with me in all my plans, and we have been very much together of late, which may account for this report. How could you believe it?’ and he smiled—his old, winning, half-mischievous smile. ‘As Rosie would say

—by-the-by, how she has grown, that dear girl of ours ;  
—“papa don’t like it.”

Hannah had borne sorrow—but she could not bear joy ; she was too weak for it. Her lips tried to speak, and failing that, to smile ; but it was in vain. She sank, quite insensible, in Bernard’s arms.

It was a good many hours before she was able to hear those ‘half-a-dozen quiet words’ which were to change the whole current of her life—of both their lives.

The plan which Madame Arthenay had first suggested, of naturalising himself in France, changing his domicile, and marrying as a French citizen, according to French law—had, immediately after his parting from Hannah, recurred again and again to Sir Bernard’s mind as the only solution of their difficulty. On consulting the Dunsmares on the subject, they also had seen the matter in the same light. Though session after session Lord Dunsmore determined to bring forward his favourite Bill, still years might elapse before it was passed and became law, and until then there was no hope of marriage in England for Hannah and Bernard.

‘You must not ask it,’ said Lady Dunsmore, ignorant—and she always remained ignorant—that he ever had asked it. ‘A woman like her would never consent. And she is right. To break your country’s laws, however unjust they may be, and then expect its protection, is like disobeying one’s father. We must do it—if compelled by his unjust exactions—but we ought to quit his house first.’

So there was no alternative but for Sir Bernard to make the sacrifice—as hard for him as Hannah’s renunciation of Rosie had been for her—and give up England for ever. His profession likewise—since no man with a conscience could break the canon law, and yet remain a clergyman.

‘And I have a conscience, though they do not think

so at the Moat-House,' said he, faintly smiling. That smile and his worn looks alone betrayed to Hannah the sufferings he must have gone through in making up his plans—now all decided—and set in train. In fact, he had already renounced everything, and prepared himself to begin a new career, to make a new home, and spend the remainder of his days in a foreign land.

'I can do it in one sense,' he continued, 'easier than most men—because of my large private fortune. I mean to buy the Château St. Roque, which you liked so much. Did you not say you could cheerfully spend your whole life there? Perhaps you may.'

Hannah smiled; and there came across her memory a trembling flash of that pleasant place—with the four towers looking at themselves in the water, and the green upland-gardens and meadows on either hand.

'Yes,' she whispered, 'we could be very happy there. It would not be so very dreadful to live in France, would it?'

'At least, we must not say so to our good friend, Madame Arthenay, or to our new compatriots. And I hope I am not so very insular as to see charms in no country except my own. Besides, am I not replanting my family tree where its old roots came from? Who knows? Years hence I may revive the glory of my Norman ancestors by making a speech, in my very best French, before the Chamber of Deputies. What say you, Hannah? Shall we shake British dust entirely off our feet, and start afresh as Monsieur and Madame de la Rivière? Great fun that!'

The boyish phrase—and the almost boyish laugh that accompanied it—comforted Hannah more than he knew. Heavy as his heart was now, and sore with his hard renunciations, there was in him that elastic nature which, grief once overpast, refuses to dwell upon it—but lives in the present and enjoys the future. And he was still young enough to have a future—to open

up new paths for himself, and carry them out nobly; to live in content and die in honour, even though it was far away from the dear England where he was born.

‘But it costs you so much—ah, so much!’ said Hannah, mournfully.

‘Yes, but I have counted the cost; and—if you will not scold me for saying so—I think you worth it all. Many men become voluntary exiles for the sake of wealth, convenience, or whim: why should not I for love? Love—which is duty also, when one is loved back again.’

Hannah smiled, knowing he was one of those whom it makes, not conceited or tyrannical, but strong and happy, to be loved back again.

‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘I have not much love to leave behind: my sisters are all married—Bertha will be next spring. No one will miss me; nor perhaps shall I soon come to miss anything—except a few graves in Easterham Churchyard.’

He stopped, and that last bitterness of exile—the clinging to the very sod of one’s own land, the sod which covers our dead—came over him, sad and sore. Those graves—buried in them lay all his childhood, his youth, his brief happy married life with the wife, whom—though he seldom spoke of her now—Hannah knew he had no more forgotten than she had forgotten her lost Arthur. Time had healed all wounds; life, and its duties, had strengthened them both—strengthened them into that calm happiness which sometimes, after much sorrow, God sees fit to send, and which it is good to accept and be thankful for. But—as for forgetting!—She said nothing, only drew Bernard’s head softly to her shoulder, and let him weep there the tears of which no man need be ashamed.

By-and-by she asked about Bertha’s marriage, which was to a gentleman in the neighbourhood whom she had refused several times, but accepted at last. He was very rich, if not very clever or very wise.

‘Still she might have done worse. He is a good fellow, and we all like the match, except perhaps Melville, who speaks sharply about it sometimes; but Bertha only laughs at him, and says she shall please herself in spite of brothers-in-law.’

Hannah looked keenly at Bernard while he spoke; but he did so in utter unsuspectingness. Evidently he had never guessed, in the smallest degree, the secret grief of his sister Adeline, the canker of her married life, that jealousy of her sister, from which all the restrictions of the law could not save her, no more than the terror of the Divorce Court can save poor miserable souls to whom vice is pleasanter than virtue. But to this right-minded, honest man, entrenched within the sacredness of a happy marriage, the one idea would have been almost as untenable as the other. Hannah was certain that, dearly as Bernard loved her now, had Rosa lived she might have come about their house continually, and he would have had no sort of feeling for her beyond the affectionate interest that a man may justly take in his wife’s sister, or cousin, or friend—the honourable chivalric tenderness for all women, which only proves how deeply the one woman he has chosen is enshrined in his heart.

So what he had never once suspected she never told him—and no one else was ever likely to do so. Adeline’s sufferings were buried with her. So best.

‘And now,’ said Sir Bernard, ‘I must say good-bye. And I shall not see you again till we meet on board the Havre steamer to-morrow.’

For he had arranged already that she should go back at once—avoiding the very appearance of evil—and remain with Madame Arthenay until he came to marry her, which, if possible, should be in Spring.

‘I shall come, like Napoleon, with the violets, and by then we must have these thin cheeks rounded, and these grave eyes looking as bright and merry as Rosie’s. I used to say, you know, there was no tell-



ing which was most of a baby, Tannie or Rosie. By-the-by, she must cease to say "Tannie" and learn to say "Mamma."

Hannah burst into tears.

'Yes, there is one thing I am not afraid of,' said she, when her full heart had a little relieved itself of its felicity. 'I know I shall be a good mother to your child. What I am afraid of is whether I shall be a sufficiently good wife to you. You might have married almost any woman you liked—young, rich, pretty; whilst I—look here, Bernard.'

She lifted up her hair, and showed him the long stripes of grey already coming—faster than ever since the trouble of the last few years; but he only kissed the place, repeating Cowper's lines, which he reminded her they had often read together in those long quiet evenings which would all come back again, when the one deep and lasting bliss of married life, companionship, would be theirs without alloy—companionship, which even in friendship alone, without marriage, had been so sweet:—

'Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,  
Are still as lovely to my sight  
As golden beams of orient light—  
My Mary.'

'No, Hannah,' he said, 'I am not afraid—neither of our new life nor of ourselves. I know what a man marries a woman for—not for this beauty or that, this quality or that peculiarity; but because she suits him, sympathises with him, is able to make of him a better man than he ever was before—as you have made me. If I had let you go, I should have been not only a coward, but a fool. I take you just as you are, "with all your imperfections on your head," as I hope you will take me?'

'Yes,' she said, laughing, though the tears were in her eyes.

'Very well, then. Let us be content.'

He put his arms about her, and stood looking deep down into her eyes. He was much handsomer than she, brighter and younger-looking ; yet there was something in Hannah's face which, with all its handsomeness, his had not—a certain spiritual charm which, when a man once recognises in a woman, is an attraction as mysterious as it is irresistible—makes him crave for her, as the one necessity of his existence, risk everything in order to win her, and, having won her, love her to the last with a passion that survives all change, all decay. What this charm was, probably Bernard himself could not have told ; but Lady Dunsmore, speaking of Hannah, once characterised it as being 'a combination of the angel and the child.'

## CHAPTER XVII.

THERE is a picture familiar to many, for it was in the Great Exhibition of 1851, and few stopped to look at it without tears—'The Last Look of Home,' by Ford Madox Browne. Merely a bit of a ship's side—one of those emigrant ships such as are constantly seen at Liverpool, or other ports whence they sail—with its long rows of dangling cabbages, and its utter confusion of cargo and passengers. There, indifferent to all, and intently gazing on the receding shore, sit two persons—undoubtedly a man and his wife—emigrants—and bidding adieu to home for ever. The man is quite broken-down ; but the woman, sad as she looks, has hope and courage in her face. Why not ? In one hand she firmly clasps her husband's—the other supports her sleeping babe. *She* is not disconsolate, for she carries her 'home' with her.

In the picture the man is—not at all like Bernard, certainly ; but the woman is exceedingly like Hannah

—in expression at least—as she sat on the deck of the French steamer, taking her last look of dear Old England, with its white cliffs glimmering in the moonlight—fainter and fainter every minute—across the long reach of Southampton Water.

Bernard sat beside her—but he too was very silent. He meant to go back again as soon as he had seen her and Rosie and Grace safely landed at Havre; but he knew that to Hannah this farewell of her native land was, in all human probability, a farewell ‘for good.’

Ay, for good—in the fullest sense; and she believed it; believed that they were both doing right, and that God’s blessing would follow them wherever they went; yet she could not choose but be a little sad, until she felt the touch of the small, soft hand which, now as ever, was continuously creeping into Tannie’s. Then she was content. If it had been God’s will to give her no future of her own at all, she could have rested happily in that of the child and the child’s father.

It happened to be a most beautiful night for crossing—the sea calm as glass, and the air mild as summer, though it was in the beginning of November. Hannah could not bear to go below, but with Rosie and Grace occupied one of those pleasant cabins upon deck—sheltered on three sides, open on the fourth. There, wrapped in countless rugs and shawls, Rosie being in an ecstasy at the idea of going to bed in her clothes, ‘all under the tars,’ (‘s’ was still an impossible first consonant to the baby tongue), she settled down for the night, with her child in her arms, and her faithful servant at her feet.

Sir Bernard made them all as comfortable and warm as he could—kissed his child, and Hannah too, in Grace’s presence. For he had himself informed the nurse how matters stood, and told her that in his house she should have a home for life, in a country where marriages such as hers and theirs were considered

honourable, natural, and right. Then he bade them all good night, and went to the cabin below.

Hannah could not sleep; but she rested, quiet and happy. Even happiness could not make her physically strong; but she left all her days to come in God's hands—to be many or few, as He thought best. The others fell sound asleep, one at her bosom, the other at her feet; but she lay wide awake, listening to the lap-lap of the water against the boat, and watching the night sky, so thick with stars. At length the moon came too, and looked in upon them like a sweet calm face, resembling a dead face in its unchangeable peace; so much so that, when Hannah dropped at last into a confused doze, she dreamt it was the face of her sister Rosa smiling down out of heaven upon them all.

When she woke it was no longer moonlight, but daylight, at least daybreak; for she could discern the dark outline of the man at the wheel, the only person she saw on deck. The boat seemed to be passing swiftly and silently as a phantom ship through a phantom ocean; she hardly knew whether she was awake or asleep, dead or alive, till she felt the soft breathing of the child in her arms, and with a passion of joy remembered all.

A few minutes after, Hannah, raising her head as high as she could without disturbing Rosie saw a sight which she had never seen before, and never in all her life may see again, but will remember to the end of her days.

Just where sea and sky met, was a long, broad line of most brilliant amber, gradually widening and widening as the sun lifted himself out of the water and shot his rays, in the form of a crown, right up into the still dark zenith. Then, as he climbed higher, every floating cloud—and the horizon seemed full of them—became of a brilliant rose-hue, until the whole heaven blazed with colour and light. In the midst of it all, dim as a dream, but with all these lovely tints flitting over it, Hannah saw, far in the distance, the line of the French shore.

It was her welcome to her new country and new life—the life which was truly like being born again into another world. She accepted the omen; and, clasping her child to her bosom, closed her eyes and praised God.

\* \* \* \* \*

All this happened long ago, and Monsieur and Madame de la Rivière have never returned to England. They still inhabit the Château de Saint Roque, beloved and honoured far and wide in the land of their adoption; and finding, after all, that the human heart beats much alike, whether with French blood or English, and that there is something wonderfully noble and loveable about that fine old Norman race which (as Madame Arthenay long delighted in impressing upon her dear neighbours, and upon the many English friends who visited them in their pleasant foreign home) once came over and conquered and civilised us rude Saxons and Britons.

Whether the master and mistress of Saint Roque will ever return to England, or whether little Austin, the eldest of their three sons,—Rosie is still the only daughter—will ever become not only the heir of their French estates and name, but one day Sir Austin Rivers of the Moat-House, remains to be proved. At any rate, they mourn little after that old home, being so thoroughly happy in their new one—as those deserve to be who have sacrificed for one another almost everything except what they felt to be right. But they are happy, and what more can they or any one desire?

THE END.

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